



BLACK SUMMONER

THE FALSE CHAMPIONS

AUTHOR: DOUFU MAYOI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY: KUROGIN (DIGS)

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SERA AND EFIL, WHO WERE SEEING AN OCEAN FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THEIR LIVES WERE EXTREMELY THRILLED. IT WAS ALSO MY FIRST TIME SEEING AN OCEAN SO BLUE AND CLEAN.

SO THIS IS AN OCEAN!

"IT'S SO PRETTY..."

EFIL

KELVIN

SERA



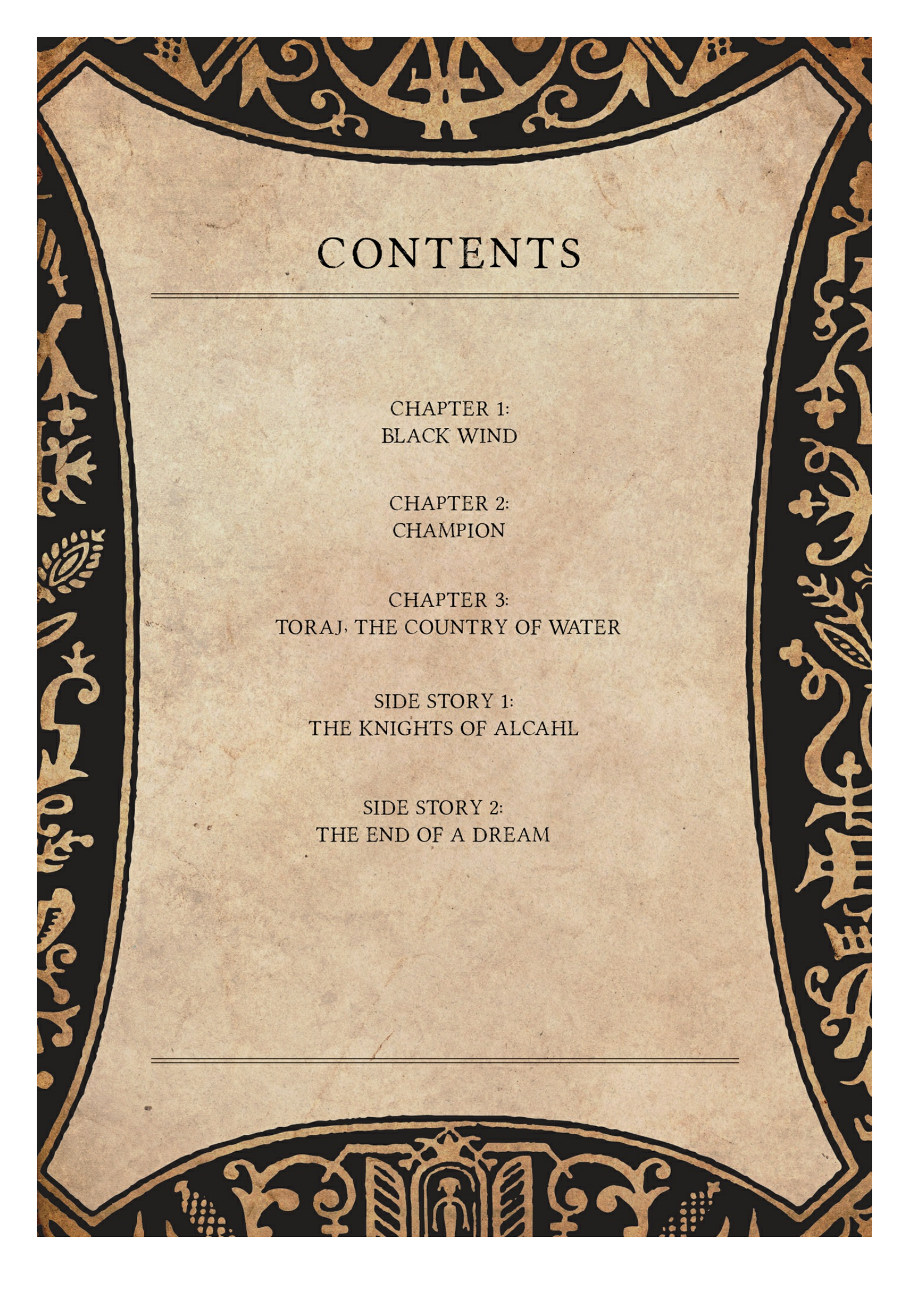




"WHO DARES
DISTURB MY
SLEEP?!"

THE AMETHYST-
COLORED DRAGON
BURST THROUGH THE
WATER'S SURFACE
AND HOVERED IN THE
AIR, SWIVELING ITS
HEAD AROUND.

"WELL, THAT'S
SURPRISING. YOU
HAVE ENOUGH
INTELLIGENCE TO
SPEAK DESPITE
BEING AN EVIL
DRAGON, HUH?"



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Chapter 1: Black Wind

The feast at the Fairy's Song had thankfully gone largely without mishap, lasting until well into the night, with me waking up the next morning with a terrible hangover. Adventurers, both those who had been in the industry longer than me and those who had joined only recently, had approached me one after another to pour drinks of celebration. As the star of the feast, I couldn't refuse any of them, and it became an endless loop of me draining my cup only to have it refilled soon afterwards. *Ugh, to think that I'd get a hangover even in another world...*

As for how my merry band of comrades had fared...

In Efil's case, although she was sixteen years old and thus legally of age to drink, she was quite weak to alcohol. From start to finish, she drank only juice, all while tending to me throughout the feast. The next morning, it was her devoted nursing that enabled me to make a speedy recovery.

Gerard, in contrast, had thrown back mugs and mugs of alcohol without a care in the world. He must have had a lot more than me, but apparently, he wasn't capable of getting drunk. When I went down to the tavern the next morning, I found him drinking again. Life truly was unfair.

Having struck up a friendship with Uld-san, Gerard had a blast trading stories of heroism and other interesting episodes from their pasts. Considering the pair featured one of Parth's strongest adventurers and a member of the party that had subjugated a demon the other day, all the young adventurers had flocked over to listen in, enraptured.

The biggest surprise had been Sera. She became extremely clingy when drunk, and was the kind of drinker who couldn't stop despite having almost no tolerance at all. At the start of the feast, she had rushed to my side, loudly declaring, "I'll pour for you!" Then she'd awkwardly and carefully poured me a cup. That was fine. However, having had almost no experience with alcohol, she grew curious about it after seeing me down it with such gusto. So I asked her,

“Want to try some?” and poured her a bit. One sip and her face promptly turned red, her slanted ruby-red eyes glazed over, and...well, the rest is easily imagined.

To my surprise, Melfina turned out to be the most troublesome member of the party. Due to not having been able to join the feast, she turned a bit sulky. *Come on, you're a goddess, don't be sulking about something like that...*

::I am not sulking. I've been silent only because I've been *very busy* wondering when it is that you'll finally be able to Summon me.::

Didn't we go over this the other day? About how I still wouldn't have enough even if I bumped Energy, the skill that boosts max MP, to Rank S, even though my current max MP is already over two thousand?

::Oh, oops....::

What?

::Em...I'd actually forgotten about this, but the MP needed to Summon those with a class related to the gods is several dozen times more expensive than Summoning anything else.::

So, hey, wanna hear this great idea I have? How about you quit your job? I'm starting to think I won't ever have enough MP to actually Summon you.

::Honestly, I'm not entirely against the idea, but...hm, guess I don't really have a choice.::

Uh, you really are going to quit your job?

::Oh, no, I'm going to use an artificial body.::

Am I imagining it or did she just say something completely off the wall again?

::It's actually not that rare for gods and goddesses to descend to the mortal world for a bit of a breather. And when we do, we make an artificial body based on ourselves. Possessing that body allows us to go out and about while hiding who we really are. Naturally, our abilities are severely limited while in this state...but the appearance will be exactly the same, so you can feel free to fall in love with me at first sight once again.::

I'm not sure that 'feel free' is the right phrase to use there, but never mind. So,

if you do that, then the amount of MP needed to Summon you would go down drastically?

::I can't say for certain. There is no precedent for something like this. No one with the Summoning skill has tried to call down a deity before. Naturally, I'll need to make adjustments with that in mind...and then the skills...::

Um, Melfina?

::Honey, I'm taking some time off.::

Wait, again?!

::I need to make some adjustments to the body that I'll be using. If all goes well, you will soon be able to Summon me without a problem. There's no time like the present! Ciao!::

And with that, Melfina once again left the Network. *How long is she going to be gone for this time...?* There was nothing I could do but pray for all those "adjustments" — whatever they were — to be done soon.

Melfina's plans aside, a total of three days had passed since the feast, and the rest of us were currently gathered in my dedicated workshop within the guild. The agenda for the day's assembly was of paramount importance. Indeed, it was none other than —

"How about we get this new equipment unveiling party underway?"

"I did my best with the sewing."

— the unveiling and handing out of various pieces of equipment for our party members. Thanks to the levels that Efil and I had gained from the battle with Viktor, both of us had finally attained Rank S in our skills of Sewing and Smithing, respectively. Until then, no matter how hard we tried, we'd only been able to make items up to Rank A. Now, however, we finally had the ability to create the highest ranking equipment in this world.

"My king, I am beside myself with impatience!"

"So my battle gear is finished too?!"

Thanks to my skill increasing to Rank S, the amount of time required to make each and every piece of equipment had decreased dramatically, and within only

three days, I had managed to make everything that each member of my party needed. In fact, I was now feeling like I could make absolutely anything I wanted to, as long as I had the necessary materials.

“Let’s start with our newest member, Sera, who’s experiencing one of our unveiling parties for the first time today. I was in charge of your weapons, while Efil handled the protective gear. Just as requested, I used Viktor’s carapace to make you a pair of gauntlets. Um, it might be a bit late to ask, but...you sure about this?”

“One hundred percent.”

It was my first time making equipment for Sera, so I had asked her if she had anything particular in mind. Honoring her request, I then used the piece of Viktor’s carapace that we had brought back as proof of subjugation to make “something that a pugilist would use.” But now that the time had come to actually hand it to her, I found myself hesitating slightly. *Are demons okay with using parts of someone of the same race — someone they’d been close to, no less — in such a manner?*

Sera repeated herself, elaborating slightly in a firm tone. “It will feel like Viktor is lending me his strength whenever I use it.”

This is her wish, so let’s respect it.

“All right then. The pair together is named Arondight. Try them out and let me know how they feel.”

As soon as I handed them to her, Sera looked entirely infatuated with the black coloring and gold trim that spanned from fist to elbow. This was a Rank S item that, thanks to the special properties of Viktor’s carapace, boasted incredible toughness paired with such high flexibility that it wouldn’t interfere at all with even the most detailed of finger movements.

“And this is from me. I hope that the design is to your liking.”

I had also asked Sera for her input regarding her outfit, but I ran into an unexpected wall there. It seemed Sera herself did not know what she liked. Having been locked up in a castle for her entire life, everything had been prepared for her — including her clothing — so she had never had to choose for

herself. To help her out, I had uploaded the designs for every type of clothing I knew of to the Follower Network, and had her pick out one from among them.

“Hmm...”

That said, the quantity of clothing designs that I’d seen while living in Japan for twenty-three years was rather staggering. Sera going through all the options ended up taking more time than it took Efil to actually make it. It was only two days later that Sera had finally exclaimed, “This one! I like this one!”

“Oh, you’ve made your choice? Which one is it...oh, military, huh.”

“Make it black, please! I want to match with everyone!”

In the end, Sera had settled on a military uniform. There was no outfit more suitable to do battle in, and with Sera’s beauty and perfect curves, it was a choice that would suit her very well. *The design aside...black again, is it? Should we just go ahead and make that our theme color?*

My exchange with her was conveyed to Efil, who then came up with the outfit she was now handing to Sera.

“This outfit’s name is Queen’s Terror. Umm, I’m terribly sorry, but I’m unable to change the name...”

Oh, I get you so well, Efil. After all, the item’s name is determined all by itself right after you finish it, right? And now you’re worried about Sera being offended by the seemingly negative-sounding name? But you can rest easy on that front.

“What’s wrong with it? ‘Queen’s Terror’? I like it! Sounds really cool!”

“Eh? Really? Um, thank you...for liking it...?”

Sera was smack-dab in the middle of a chuuni phase.



“My king, what about me? What do I get?” Unable to hold himself back any longer, Gerard interrupted the conversation.

“Hold on, just...just hold on. It’s not like it’s going to run away.”

Thanks to his Evolution, Gerard had attained a new unique skill: Self Modification. This was an incredible skill that not only granted him the ability to assimilate new equipment, but would also boost any gear acquired in this manner up one rank. It was thanks to this skill that Dreadnought was buffed even further. However, equipment that had been assimilated could not be removed, and assimilating a new piece of equipment into an occupied slot would cause the previous item in that slot to disappear forever. In short, it was not possible to simply swap items around at will.

“I’ve made you a new greatsword this time. I modeled it carefully based on the one you’re currently using, so you should get used to it in no time.”

“Interesting. Even the ornamental decoration looks the same. I can’t tell the difference between the two.”

“Just as I told Sera, try it out and let me know how it feels. I assure you, this is an honest to Goddess Rank S weapon.”

I had made the demonic sword, Dainsleif, by first selecting the most powerful cursed weapon from Clotho’s Storage, purifying it with the most powerful White Magic spell I was capable of, and then reforging it into a greatsword. Before the purification, there had been red lines crawling all over the surface of the blade, pulsing like blood vessels. Now, however, they were all gone, leaving behind a jet black surface so clear and pleasing to the eye that it almost seemed to be bathed in a dark light.

“So what did you two make for yourselves?”

“I got a new robe and a pair of gauntlets, and Efil got a new bow...you know what, just look forward to checking them out during our next fight.”

“Ehhh?!”

Sera voiced her displeasure loud and clear, but I was in no state to pay her any mind. Although the Smithing skill had indeed helped to significantly speed

up the process, I'd still had to pull consecutive all-nighters to finish everything in such a short period of time. With the bare minimum of explanation over, I couldn't wait to dive straight into bed.

"I shall accompany you..."

Clearly, Efil was in the same state as me.

"Umm, in that case, then m-me too...wait, don't leave me behind!"

Sera dashed out of the workshop, leaving Gerard and Clotho alone.

"It appears that Princess has another rival, don't you think, Clotho?"

The slime quivered slightly in response.



Clack, clack, clack.

With the sound of our wagon's wheels rattling in the background, I passed my eyes over the page of the open book that was being held out to me. Efil sat beside me, currently doing her best to get through it word by word.

"Boss, don't you get sick trying to read a book while on the road?"

"We're used to traveling. This amount of lurching isn't enough to make us feel anything."

"Whoa, guess adventurers really are a cut above the rest of us folks."

It was considerate of our driver to make sure that we were okay, but neither Efil nor I were prone to motion sickness. During our battles, we moved even faster and much more erratically.

"Master, this part..."

"You apply the same pronunciation technique we just discussed."

Currently, we were heading from Parth to Toraj, the Country of Water, by covered wagon. We had chosen Toraj mainly because of my voracious need for rice. It isn't easy for someone in modern Japan who's never left the country before to understand, but after eating only foreign cuisine for a prolonged period of time, a sudden and overwhelming craving for rice inevitably surfaces.

Having spent several months in this world, I was fast approaching my limit. So I had been wanting to visit Toraj — which was rumored to have something similar to rice — for quite a while. Strangely, Guildmaster Rio readily gave us permission to make the trip, so I decided to take advantage of the opportunity.

Rather than simply staring at scenery along the way, I was using the time to teach Efil how to read. Although she'd experienced enormous growth in a wide variety of areas ranging from combat to chores, she still had quite a ways to go with reading, writing and other academic studies.

"Kelvin! There's a river! A river is flowing over there!" Sera cried.

"What, you want to go fishing?"

"What's 'fishing'?"

"Ahhh...let's find a day to go fishing together after we get to Toraj."

Sera, who had her head sticking out of the back part of the wagon, was having a blast gazing at the passing landscape. For a while now, she had been making a big fuss about every little thing she spotted.

Aside from my desperate search for rice, there was one other reason we were heading to Toraj. In keeping with our promise to Viktor, we were giving Sera a chance to see more of the world. This girl had lived a life so sheltered that she didn't even know what fishing was, but she was now traveling and thoroughly enjoying the sights. Surely she would learn and experience a lot on this trip.

::Sera, lass, you sure seem to be having fun.::

As it turned out, Gerard was bad with wagon travel. Soon after we set out from Parth, he had retreated into my magic pool. Supposedly, all the bouncing hurt his hips while he was materialized. There wouldn't have been any problem if he had remained a spirit inside his armor, but as it had been a while since he'd had a body, he wanted to enjoy the feeling of it for as long as he was Summoned.

Just as our wagon entered a narrow part of the road that was closely flanked by trees, Sera suddenly turned towards me.

"Oh right, Kelvin. Something's been bothering me for a while."

“What is it?”

“You do realize that we’re secretly being watched, right?”

“Mhm, we sure are.”

“O-Oh come on, boss. Please don’t frighten me...”

Our driver was trying hard to laugh it off as a joke, but my Presence Sensing was indeed picking up something. To be more specific, there were a total of twelve people surrounding our wagon, matching our pace so as to maintain a discreet distance from us. Some of them even possessed Concealment at a pretty high rank.

“We’re not just saying it to frighten you. Darn it, they’re so disturbing that I can’t focus on enjoying the scenery!”

Sera was in possession of even more detection skills than I was, likely having been urged to invest in them as one of her doting father’s ideas for helping her to protect herself.

“W-Wait, so are they bandits?!”

“Hard to say. And it is rumored that bandits do indeed show up on this route.”

“B-Boss, are you still reading even in this situation...? That maid of yours seems really calm about everything too...”

Our abilities had, of course, long passed the point where news of approaching bandits would cause us any concern. If I really had to name a problem, it would be that we had gotten a bit numb to our Danger Detection skill. And now that this matter had come up, Efil and I also found ourselves too distracted to resume studying.

“Hey, hey, Kelvin!”

“No need to say it, I know what you mean. Oh, hey, looks like they’re starting to make a move.”

Six people wearing black stepped out from the side of the road, stopping right in front of our wagon. The rest stayed at the back, continuing to remain Concealed. Clearly, they had no intention of letting us leave.

“You in the wagon, stop right where you are!”

To my surprise, the announcement was in a woman’s voice. All six of the highwaymen had weapons tightly gripped in their hands.

“Ohhh! Boss, we’ve hit the jackpot this time. There are *two* beauties in here!”

“Really? Let me see...oho, you’re right, they look like they’d fetch quite a pretty penny. Chief will be delighted.”

The woman and the men who seemed to be her subordinates looked at us — no, looked at Efil and Sera — as if they were evaluating a product. *Is this going to be a repeat of the incident with Prince Tabura?*

“Wh-Who are you guys?! Do you realize that you are inflicting this outrage upon a wagon with adventurers on board?!”

Our driver raised his voice as if to intimidate them. Contrary to what he expected, however, the bandits responded by laughing so hard that they were soon clutching their stomachs.

“Bwahaha! Adventurers, you say? Of course we knew that. You guys are coming from Parth, right? The town that’s famous for having the continent’s weakest guild — the guild that doesn’t have a single member ranked B or higher?”

“We are Black Wind, the gang whose very name causes grown men to piss themselves. Rank C adventurers are nothing but chaff to us.”

Hah, so they’re mistaking us for Rank C or lower. At the very least, they seem fully confident about beating three adventurers of that rank. But for them to know where we came from, they must have had an eye on our wagon since early in the journey.

“Black Wind?! Hasn’t that bandit ring been wiped out already?!”

Well, okay, he’s not quite pissing himself, but it looks like our driver has indeed heard of them.

“Boss, please handle this carefully. Black Wind is a bandit gang that became notorious about a year ago. From what I heard, they were so strong that even Rank C adventurers couldn’t do much against them. But if memory serves, they

should have been destroyed by a Rank A party, so I'm not quite sure what's going on here..."

"That...does sound suspicious."

"Sorry, what did you just say, boss?"

"Oh, nothing, don't worry about it. In any case, it seems like we won't be going anywhere until we resolve this situation, right?"

All right, I've finished using Analyze Eye on all six of them. How should we handle this?

"Kekeke, look at them wordlessly trembling in fear after hearing our name!"

"Karna, please let us have a bit of fun before we sell the goods!"

"You guys, that's enough useless chatter. If you want a reward, do something that merits one," the woman admonished them, interrupting her subordinates' vulgar conversation. "As for you adventurers, your luck ran out the moment we set our sights on you. That said, it's no fun if you don't put up a fight, so try your best with whatever measly abilities you've got, all right? Guys! Seize the cargo! Grab the women and kill the men!"

Five bandits ran out in front. The six in the back remained in hiding, showing no signs of movement.

"Sera, would you like to take care of them? They probably won't be able to put up enough of a fight to make it interesting, though."

"Sure, I don't mind. But just confirming, by 'take care of,' you mean I can...?"

"It seems like their band was supposedly wiped out in the eyes of the world, so I can't say for sure whether or not they have bounties on their heads, but...they totally look like villains, right? It's probably fine to just kill them. But we do want information. So leave the woman alive."

"Gotcha. It's been a while since I last got to have some fun! I can't wait!"

Sera slammed her Arondight-clad fists together, raising a loud clash of metal on metal to pump herself up. Unfortunately, I soon rained on her parade.

"Oh, right, here's an idea: how about not using Arondight for this fight? Try it

with your bare fists alone.”

“Ehhhh? But why?!”

“The difference in strength between you and those guys is already large enough as it is. Using Arondight on top of that against a bunch of average Joes who’ve only learned a trick or two would lead to extremely messy results.”

“Well, if you insist...”

Sera looked rather unhappy, having had the wind taken out of her sails right at the start. Her desire to try out her new gear in combat was almost palpable, but this really wasn’t the right time for it.

“Aaah, I’ve totally lost all motivation to do this, but there’s no helping it, so I guess I’ll keep you guys company for a bit,” she said, languidly jumping down from the wagon.

“What, you think you’ll be able to handle all five of us by yourself?!”

“Bwahaha, she said she’ll keep us company! Sure, let’s do something fun!”

The bandits shifted their sights to the beautiful woman who suddenly stood before them, squabbling amongst themselves for the credit of beating her. There wasn’t a shred of teamwork to be seen between them.

“How about no.”

In less than the time it took to blink, Sera had already closed in on the man who had been spouting those disgusting lines earlier and squarely planted a body blow on him. Her fist sank hard into his torso, causing painful-sounding cracks and snaps to ring out. It wasn’t hard to gauge from those sounds how much internal damage he had just taken. The momentum of the punch sent the bandit flying through the air for several meters.

Ooooh, he landed on his head. That can’t be good, right?

“Oh my, and I thought I had pulled my punch. Guess that was still too much?”

::He died instantly, lass::

To think the difference in strength is that extreme! Looks like the bandits can’t keep up with Sera’s movements at all. I doubt whether they can even see her.

“Eh?”

Unable to process what had just happened, the gang stood frozen in shock. At this point, the previously sulky look on Sera’s face had completely cleared away.

“What’s the matter? Didn’t everyone look like they were having so much fun just now? You guys wanted to play with me, right? Umm...Soft Wind, was it?”

Oh, this girl is a total sadist.

“You six over there, how about it?”

Sera looked directly at the six bandits who were still in hiding. I didn’t even have to tell her their positions.

“Master, um, did you write this sentence wrong?”

“Oops, yeah, good catch...this is how it’s supposed to be.”

I turned back to focus on Efil’s studies.



What kind of a joke is this?

The scene before my eyes could only be described as the unstoppable rampage of an absolute predator. This woman who we had thought to be nothing more than an easy target mere seconds before was massacring my people right before my eyes.

The first one who died was Ens. That woman, who had been standing in front of the wagon, suddenly appeared right in front of him and punched him once in the abdomen. How did that slim frame of hers manage to dish out so much power? By the time I heard the gruesome sound of his bones shattering and internal organs being crushed, he was already flying towards me, his dead, soulless eyes staring right into mine.

“Eh?”

My other subordinates were as shocked as I was. They all froze in their previously frenzied dash towards what they had thought to be easy prey.

“Oh my, and I thought I had pulled my punch. Guess that was still too much?”

That was her pulling her punch?!

My boys were by no means weak. In fact, they were stronger than the average adventurer. All of them were at least Level 25, and if they worked together properly, I knew they had the ability to subdue the party led by Uld, Parth's strongest adventurer, easily enough. Someone who could talk about pulling their punches while dealing with my gang would have to be Rank A or, Goddess forbid, Rank S.

"What's the matter? Didn't everyone look like they were having so much fun just now? You guys wanted to play with me, right? Umm...Soft Wind, was it?" said the woman provokingly, with a smile so bewitchingly beautiful that even I almost fell for her. Not only was she completely looking down on us, she had even gone to the trouble of purposefully botching the gang's name.

"Y-You bitch! Guys, how much longer do you plan on standing around like idiots! Forget about capturing her; kill her instead!"

I snapped my dumbfounded subordinates back to their senses and commanded them to attack. Thinking about it now, it was obviously the wrong call. I never backed down when someone picked a fight with me, and my short-tempered personality had prompted me to do what I always did without a second thought. I should have recognized our difference in strength based on what had happened to Ens, and ordered everyone to scatter and run away. If so, perhaps she might have let us leave with our lives. Perhaps we could have regrouped with the others who were hidden on standby close behind. However, it was too late now.

"Oh...I guess..." murmured the woman after shooting a quick look behind her.

Misinterpreting that as an opening, Doil and Pond resumed their sprint towards her. Both of them were equipped with daggers. These two, who were acknowledged even by the officers of Black Wind for their high Agility stats, pulled off the perfect surprise attack with flawless teamwork.

"Oh?"

When the woman noticed Doil and Pond's approach, their daggers were already mere inches away from her neck and heart.

Got her!

Surely my two underlings had thought the same thing. It didn't take long for us to change our minds, though.



Thwack.

Pond thought it strange that he couldn't feel any feedback from his dominant hand. Normally, this would be the moment when the heavenly feeling of slicing through flesh flooded his brain. This time, however, he wasn't feeling anything. In fact, he couldn't even feel the handle of the poisoned dagger that he was so used to wielding...

"Hey, this is a pretty well-maintained dagger that you're using. Well, I mean, for a bandit, that is."

Inadvertently looking up at the source of that voice, Pond found the woman that he had thought he'd killed nonchalantly holding his own dagger up and evaluating it. *Why is she still alive? Her throat should be sliced open and my knife should be buried in her heart!*

It was only then that the figure of his partner, Doil, arm snapped and head twisted around at an impossible angle, came into Pond's view. He suddenly understood that in all likelihood, he himself was in the same state.

What the hell...just happened...?

With no one to answer his unvoiced question, Pond's consciousness sank into eternal darkness.



Both Doil and Pond had been killed. But how? I could not comprehend what had just happened. One moment I was convinced that they'd struck the woman down, but the next, they were the ones lying on the ground, arms and necks completely crushed. Did that mean she had attacked each of them twice within a split second?

Held in the woman's hands were Doil's and Pond's daggers. Perhaps she had not even considered their approach to be an attempt on her life. When did she snatch the daggers? When did she break my two subordinates' arms, and when

did she snap their necks? I had not caught a single second of what had happened.

By then, my next subordinate was winding up an attack. It was the strongman, Guilder, who was so powerful that he needed only a single hand to swing his solid iron hammer around. In addition, despite being a strongman, he was also fast enough to keep up with Doil and Pond. All in all, he was an extremely capable member of our fighting force.

Taking advantage of the brief moment during which the woman was occupied with the daggers, Guilder lifted his hammer as high as he could before slamming it down with every ounce of strength he could muster. The blow had enough power to shatter armor and pulverize shields.

“Oh, are we doing a strength competition this time?”

The hammer, with all its supposed destructive power, was easily stopped by the woman. With nothing more than a single one of her thin, shapely arms, no less.

“Not that I mind, though. All right, I’ll play along.”

There wasn’t a single bead of sweat on her forehead.

“HAAAAAAHHHHH!”

Guilder roared at the top of his lungs while pressing the hammer down so hard that his veins were visible on his bulky arms. Even so, the hammer would not budge.

I couldn’t help but blurt out my surprise. “That’s impossible...Guilder’s Strength stat is over 200!!”

“Is that so? Hmm, so this is what a Strength of 200 can do, huh?” murmured the woman, who had apparently heard me, in a bored voice. “Well, it’s about time for me to make a move, I suppose.”

As she said that, fissures spidered across the surface of Guilder’s huge hammer. They spread quickly, cracking loudly as they went. An instant later, the entire weapon crumbled into pieces. The only thing left behind was the woman, who still had her right hand lifted up, and Guilder, who was still holding onto

the handle, now reduced to nothing more than a mere stick. As I watched, it slowly slipped from Guilder's grip, after which his huge bulk also crumpled to the ground. With him lying on his side, I could see that his chest had completely caved in.

Who could have foreseen such an insane outcome? Four of my people had died within mere seconds of each other. The only ones left were myself and Yuro, my last remaining subordinate.

"Wh-Who are you...?!"

"Um...an adventurer from Parth, I guess?"

"Why is your answer a question?! You've got to be fucking with us...!"

With the situation quickly spiraling out of control, there was only one last thing for me to do. Although this option would reduce the entire wagon to cinders, we were no longer in any position to worry about that. I signaled to the group behind us.

"That nonchalant look isn't gonna stay on your face any longer!"

All six of the gang members I had ordered to hang back were mages. And they weren't just any mages but specialists in Red Magic, the most destructive element of all. Within moments, the entire area before me would be bombarded with a squall of Rank C Red Magic spells. It was a pity that we would be losing such valuable spoils, but we had human losses on our side too. I couldn't very well let my men's deaths go unavenged.

"Commence bombardment!"

I threw my arm down, signaling for the descent of hell on earth.

"....."

"How much longer am I supposed to wait?"

"Uh..."

That's strange. I repeated the signal several more times, but no spells came flying from behind. *Don't tell me they all left us here to die and ran away by themselves?!*

“What’s wrong? Efil, do you know?”

The woman turned to look at her allies in the wagon. Standing gracefully atop the back was a maid with a bow in her hand.

“I wonder what indeed. I’m afraid I haven’t the faintest idea either,” returned the maid in a matter-of-fact tone as she put her bow away.



“Hah, for some reason, I’m in better shape than I was before I was sealed away. So, this is the power-up from Summoning’s magic supply?”

Although she had first taken to the task rather reluctantly, she was now in a great mood after what had turned out to be a chance for her to rampage as she pleased.

::That was a rather nice show back there. If you are interested, I would like to spar with you one of these days.::

It appeared that she had impressed even Gerard. This was something that I wouldn’t ever say out loud, but I had been wondering if a princess who had lived such a sheltered life up until now could actually hold her own in a fight. However, my concerns had clearly been unfounded.

Perhaps this is a result of the highly specialized education that her father arranged for her. Seems like she really might be able to put up an even fight against Gerard.

“Come on, was there any need to cut it that close?”

“But I wasn’t cutting it close at all.”

Sera tilted her head in puzzlement as I got down from the wagon and approached her.

“I wasn’t talking about you, but the six people who had been hiding in the back. You sensed them too, didn’t you?” I sighed as I jerked a thumb towards the wagon behind me.

“It wasn’t a problem, though, was it? I figured that you and Efil would easily be able to handle it even if those lackeys shot their magic or bows or whatever.”

Has the poor driver completely slipped her mind...?

“G-Goodness gracious, to have handled members of Black Wind like they were mere children...!”

“Ah!”

The sight of our middle-aged driver gingerly clambering down from his seat and heading towards us caused Sera to start as she finally remembered he was there.

“Uh...well...the point is, Efil did take care of them all, so...so all’s well that ends well!”

“Please just be more careful next time...” *While it was true that Efil did indeed shoot down all of the guys in the back, you’re just using that as an excuse, aren’t you?*

The conversation wasn’t going to proceed if I kept prodding, though, so I decided to put the matter on the backburner for now. I turned from the increasingly flustered Sera to the bandits who had been tied up.

“So, why is the supposedly wiped-out bandit ring Black Wind back in action?”

“.....”

“.....”

Silence, really? The only two survivors — the female leader and one of her thugs — looked like they had no intention of opening their mouths.

“Boss, let’s hand these two over to the authorities in Toraj. Considering how boldly they attacked us, surely they must have gone after other people before, which means there’s a good possibility that there are bounties out for them.”

“I’m on board with that, but first I’d like to extract as much information as possible.”

Hearing that, the leader laughed scornfully. *Well, here’s hoping they talk before we have to resort to using force.*

“Hah! Who the hell would talk to mere —”

“Your names are Karna and Yuro, and your levels are 31 and 26. Those are

rather high levels for bandits. Why don't you guys just work as normal adventurers? You could have earned a fair bit of money doing so."

"You bastard, you have Analyze Eye?!"

Bingo. My plan was to slowly expose her personal information little by little. For what it was worth, she also possessed Concealment at a rather high rank, but it was meaningless before the superiority of Rank S. Exposing someone's personal information without their express permission was considered an extremely insulting thing to do.

"What should I reveal next? Your age? Your skills?"

"Boss..."

"Hah! Do as you please!"

The woman turned her face away. *What a stubborn person.*

"Kelvin, if you find this too annoying, how about I cast a Black Magic spell on them?"

"Hm? You know a good one?" Sera's suggestion had come out of the blue. *There's a spell for interrogation?*

"I may not look like it, but I was even better than Viktor at magic!"

"Oh, is that so? Then yes, please."

Sera's expression was smug and she looked completely confident. Given how sure of herself she sounded, I figured she might as well have a go. For some reason, though, a small nugget of unease remained in my mind.

"Many spells in Black Magic can't be used quickly, but my class is Cursed Pugilist. I wreath my fist in magic and then punch my opponents. That way, the magic has a one hundred percent chance of hitting. Though admittedly, there's no need to do that against people who're bound up and unable to dodge."

Smiling cheerfully, Sera placed a hand on the male bandit's head. Likely having recalled the scene of his friends being killed in quick succession, he started quivering uncontrollably. The fist that had shattered bones and crushed organs was now grabbing his own head in a claw-like grip. He had every right to be scared.

“So what’s the spell that you’re planning on casting?”

“Hmm, how about one that makes him bleed from every pore in his skin?”

“Um...won’t he die before we get any info from him?”

Maybe I’d chosen the wrong person for this, after all...aw man, look at that, the guy’s started crying.

“I was joking, of course. Just a joke. Spells that cause bleeding need a while to take full effect. It seems his mouth is pretty tight, so I’m thinking Hypnosis will do the trick.”

Black Magic began to emanate from Sera’s hand. It looked exactly like what Viktor had done during our fight with him. *Wait a moment. Does that mean...*

“Hey, Sera. Could it be that Viktor used Black Magic in the same way as you?”

“What are you saying? Viktor was a Cursed Pugilist too. Of course he used it any opportunity he got. I’m sure you guys already know this, having fought him personally, but he also fought while wreathing his fist in some Black Magic spell or other.”

Uwah, which means we would have been finished if we had come into contact with his fists even once? Thank heaven none of us did! I didn’t even notice him having used such magic. If I possessed Magic Detection like Sera does, I might have been able to deal with it somehow, but there’s no point dwelling on all these ‘what ifs’ now.

“Why do you ask?” Once again, Sera looked at me with puzzlement.

“Never mind, don’t worry about it. So, this Hypnosis spell. I’ll take a wild guess and say that it hypnotizes the target?”

“Mhm, it makes the target’s consciousness go hazy. In the midst of battle, this spell can only cause a target to lose consciousness for a fraction of a second, but if I continue applying it for a prolonged period of time like this...”

Abruptly, all strength left the man’s body. *So he’s hypnotized now?*

“It transforms into the perfect spell for interrogations! Go on, ask him anything you like!”

Nice! At first, I was worried about how this would turn out, but it seems like Sera can really get things done when she puts her mind to it. Sorry for having doubted you.

“Wha — Yuro, wake up! A member of Black Wind must not succumb so easily!”

The woman started raising a ruckus in an attempt to wake up her underling. Despite that, Sera remained unfazed.

“Should I gag her?” offered Efil.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sera replied. “Loud noises aren’t enough to break the spell.”

“Goddammit...” The bandit leader ground her teeth, seemingly trying to glare us to death. Then again, her current circumstances hardly allowed her to do anything else.

“All right, let’s start the interrogation, shall we?”

Chapter 2: Champion

After the incident, we resumed our journey and soon found ourselves at Toraj at last. Living up to its name as the Country of Water, the capital was flanked on one side by the ocean, with there being innumerable wooden boats moored in its harbor. If I had to venture a guess, the reason the architectural style in this city had a slight Japanese vibe was likely that its founder had been a transmigrator. Seeing the kimono-like clothing worn by passersby on the streets gave me a twinge of nostalgia. *What if the founder's real name happened to be Toraji?*

“Whoa, water as far as my eyes can see! So this is an *ocean*!”

“It’s so pretty...”

Sera and Efil, who were seeing an ocean for the first time in their lives, were extremely thrilled. It was also my first time seeing an ocean so blue and clean. Back on Earth, a location of this quality would have definitely made it onto TV shows and magazines covering famous tourist spots. Sera was in total vacation mode now, having changed from her usual military uniform into casual clothing.

“Boss and madams, is this your first time visiting Toraj? I was also mighty surprised when I first came here.”

“This place is simply gorgeous...”

If our wagon had not been loaded up, the two girls would probably have headed straight off for a dip in the sea. However, we couldn’t very well do that as we had to hand over the two members of Black Wind to the local Adventurer’s Guild first. Thanks to Sera’s Hypnotism, we had managed to extract all of the information we could from the male bandit, then from the leader as well. At the moment, both of them were fast asleep in the back of the wagon.

The information that we had obtained was as follows: first, Black Wind had indeed been revived. Or to be exact, they had merely pretended to be wiped

out in the first place. The Rank A adventurer party that had supposedly destroyed them had actually taken over the gang. Since the previous head of Black Wind really had been killed, and his head had been brought back to the guild as proof, the group was officially declared to be disbanded.

Aside from those who had died during the confrontation itself, however, the majority of Black Wind had in fact survived. Now a Rank A adventurer was controlling the gang from the shadows, and it was also he who had ordered the attack on us. He had kept his identity a secret from all but the highest echelons of Black Wind, and was known to be constantly moving around.

Even so, how many Rank A adventurers can there be? Guess we can leave this part to the guild. Honestly, though, I can't imagine it taking all that long.

Secondly, we learned that Black Wind's main activities at present were kidnapping and human trafficking. Obviously, Efil and Sera had been targeted for that reason. There were several squads, each led by an officer like Karna, that were based in different areas all doing the same thing.

Furthermore, they had managed to prevent news of their existence from reaching nearby city authorities and Adventurer's Guild branches thanks to two facts: one, the average level of their members was so high that they could easily overwhelm the run-of-the-mill adventurers who were usually hired as guards for journeys between cities, and two, they were extremely thorough in cleaning up the locations of their attacks and obfuscating any remaining traces. They kidnapped adventurers and civilians alike, selling them all into slavery...and all of this had been ordered by the Rank A adventurer who had become their new chief.

"Heyyy, let's hand these guys over quickly. I want to see the ocean up close! I also want to try that 'fishing' thing you mentioned before!" urged Sera, who seemed to be nearing the end of her patience. Although Efil wasn't saying anything, she was fidgeting a lot too, which was extremely unusual for her. Chances were that she was feeling exactly the same as Sera.

"All right, all right. Let's head straight to the guild, then."

"Allow me to lead the way, boss. It's this street here."

Following close behind our faithful driver, the three of us headed for the Toraj

branch of the Adventurer's Guild.

"B-Black Wind?! Are you sure about that?!"

"It's true, I can back up his story. When my wagon was attacked, these here adventurers were the ones who saved me."

At one of the counters of the Toraj branch of the Adventurer's Guild, I had turned over the two Black Wind members in our custody and reported on everything that had happened. Thanks to our driver also coming along and confirming my story, things proceeded without issue.

"Umm, so you are an adventurer from Parth? Pardon me, but may I have a look at your guild card, please?"

I obediently handed over my gold-colored card. Guild cards were colored based on the adventurer's rank. Rank F was blue, Rank E was red, then subsequent ranks were green, bronze, silver, and gold. Therefore, as a Rank A adventurer, my card was now gold.

"Wait, you're Rank A?! I apologize for my disrespect!"

"Boss, I knew you were strong, but to think you were Rank A this whole time..."

"That's right! So treat him accordingly!"

Sera, why are you the one looking so proud?

"Oh, don't worry about it. More importantly..."

I passed on the information about Black Wind that we had acquired from our interrogation. The Adventurer's Guild had branches all over the continent, so our report would reach them all in no time. *Hopefully, this will help reduce the number of kidnapping victims...*

"Would you happen to have knowledge of the adventurer who supposedly subjugated the old Black Wind? They are likely the main culprit behind the gang's revival," added Efil.

"I'm very sorry. This is a matter above my own authority, so I will need to call my superior. In the meantime, please have a rest in the reception room."



The receptionist guided us to a separate room, where we waited for several minutes.

Ker-chak.

The woman who had opened the door was a charming-looking older lady. I got up from my chair and Sera scrambled to her feet as well. Efil did not need to move, as she had been standing behind me the whole time.

“It’s my pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am the guildmaster of the Toraj branch of the Adventurer’s Guild. My name is Mist.”

“The pleasure is all mine. I’m Kelvin, an adventurer.”

We exchanged a handshake, then settled into seats facing each other across the table.

“I’ve heard about you from Rio. In fact, you’re pretty much all he talks about these days. It’s quite rare for him to be this excited about someone, you know.”

So Rio and Mist-san keep in contact with each other?

“Guildmaster Rio has helped me out a lot. But...well, I’m rather surprised to hear this account of his opinion of me. He’s never shown any sign of it during my interactions with him.”

“He’s got an obstinate streak, that one. He won’t tell you directly, but I think he values you rather highly.”

“It would be quite an honor if that’s the case...”

But really, Rio highly evaluates me? I have so many memories of him twisting my arm to do things that I’m not sure how I feel about the idea.

“Let me guess, he keeps pressing you to do jobs, right? Don’t worry, it’s not just you. He’s always been that way.”

“May I ask how long the two of you have been acquainted?”

“It’s been more than twenty years now, but he and I were once in the same party. That guy, he even earned the nickname ‘Analyzer’ because of how often he went around using Analyze Eye on people without their permission.”

“Hahaha...yeah, I’m a victim as well.”

After continuing to make small talk for a while longer, we finally got down to business.

“So, about Black Wind...”

“Indeed, our receptionist already passed on the information that you provided. We’ve considered the following three factors: the rank of the person who brought in the information, the apprehension of the actual perpetrators, and the eyewitness testimony of Rudo-san over there. In case you are not aware, Rudo-san is highly reputable in the transportation industry, and we have also been in his care many times. In light of all this, we have deemed your information highly credible and have already passed it along to the other branches of the Adventurer’s Guild.”

Oh wow, so our driver — uh, Rudo-san? — is actually well-known?

I turned to look at him, just in time to catch him scratching his cheek embarrassedly, muttering, “Eh, it’s nothing much.”

Hm, Mist-san sure works fast.

“Now, about the party that took on the subjugation of Black Wind...” Mist-san paused briefly before continuing. “At the moment, they still reside here, in the capital of Toraj.”



“If they’re in Toraj, then we can immediately g—”

Before Efil finished her sentence, Mist-san shook her head. “There are extenuating circumstances. Unfortunately, things are not that simple.”

“What do you mean?”

Mist-san stood up abruptly, then walked over to retrieve a book from one of the shelves that lined the room. After flipping through the pages a bit, she left it on the table, opened to a certain page.

“Roughly one year ago, after Black Wind was subjugated, a certain news publication printed this article.”

I picked up the book and the three of us gathered around it together. The page had what looked like a newspaper clipping glued to it. *Ah, a scrapbook.*

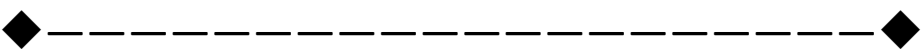
“Please take your time and read through the article.”

“Thank you. We’ll have a look.”

◆——Rank A Adventurer Christoph and Party Annihilate the Bandit Gang
Black Wind!——◆

Today, our glorious king, Zel-sama, he who rules over our illustrious Kingdom of Trycen, has truly delightful news to announce to all. The notorious bandit gang, Black Wind, whose name has caused the world to tremble in fear of late, has been struck down by the Trycen-born Rank A adventurer Christoph-shi and his party. Although Black Wind is internationally wanted for countless charges of murder and kidnapping, no one had successfully determined the location of their headquarters before. In addition, the combat prowess of each and every one of the gang’s members was so high that even knightly orders could not carelessly engage. The bandits’ infamy was such that they had even earned the nickname The Formless Bandit Gang.

Surely the tragic recent attack on one of our own villages is still fresh in the minds of our people. It was Christoph-shi who, spurred to action by this terrible incident, stood up and took matters into his own hands. Through independent investigation, he managed to discover Black Wind’s hideout and even brought back the head of their abominable leader. In honor of this highly heroic feat, Zel-sama has decided to bestow a Trycen Medal of Honor upon Christoph-shi. With this, Christoph-shi has officially become a Champion of Trycen. Keep your eyes peeled for the future successes of our great new champion.



“I see...”

“The adventurer that you are looking for is most likely Christoph. As the article states, he is now being held up as a Champion of Trycen. If we mishandle this matter, we could end up causing an international dispute between Toraj and Trycen.”

So in other words, even the Adventurer’s Guild can’t easily touch him. What a

troublesome country Trycen is. For me, I mean.

“But we have all this evidence. Just because some stupid country’s calling him a champion or whatever, we have to just give up?!” Sera cried.

“That’s...”

“Sera, calm down. What Mist-san is saying is that we need to prepare properly.”

Although I turned around to pacify Sera, whose anger had suddenly flared up, I had to admit that making preparations would require time. And considering how diplomatically sensitive this matter could become, the amount of time needed would be quite substantial indeed. *If only we had something that could prove our legitimacy without any shadow of doubt —*

“Hm?” *Just now, did...*

“Master, what’s the matter?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing. Getting back on track...” *There’s no way this is ‘nothing,’ though. What did I just pick up...?*

I switched to the Follower Network, through which we could exchange thoughts instantaneously.

Sera.

::Huh? Are we having a secret conversation?::

Did any of your sensing or detection skills pick up on four large presences just now?

::Umm...yep, I feel them at the city gates. Their levels are all within the fifties, I think?::

As expected...

I guess coincidences really do happen, I thought to myself. And, if so, then I’m really in luck.

::Do those four have something to do with us?::

I’m still evaluating the situation, but for now... I pulled up several Status screens that were still in the Network. In all likelihood, they are this era’s

Heroes.

::!::

::!::

::!::

Previously, Melfina had visited Deramis and received a recording orb — a Rank A item capable of storing any and all kinds of information — from the Oracle while granting her a prophecy. Although this particular orb had been returned to the Oracle, Melfina had uploaded the information to our Network and left it there. To my surprise, this had enabled me to track those four individuals by attaching markers to them through my Presence Sensing skill.

Yep, I can feel them more strongly now. Seems they've just entered the city.

I could not sense any knights nearby, which meant they had come to Toraj on their own.

::So these are the Heroes that my princess mentioned.::

::Heroes....::

Although these four were entirely unrelated to the matter, Sera's father had been killed by a Hero. Her conflicted emotions leaked through the Network to the rest of us.

Sera, I'm sure you already know this, but these Heroes are completely different people.

::I understand it...in my head.::

Good to hear it. After all, I'm thinking of having these Heroes help out a bit with this issue of ours.

Clearly, she still needed time to sort out the feelings in her heart. I would have to keep an eye on her and give her guidance where needed.

::The Heroes are certainly far more popular and trusted than Christoph is. We have evidence against Christoph, so if we can secure the guild's and Deramis's backing, even Trycen would not be able to protest.::

::My king, you intend to pit the Heroes against Black Wind?::

Why would I do that? I wouldn't get to do any fighting myself that way.

::.....::

::.....::

::.....::

Don't all of you go silent on me at the same time!

Of course, my love of battle wasn't the only reason. The Heroes' current capabilities were only in the middle-to-high percentile of Rank A at best. There was no guarantee that they could actually win against Black Wind or Christoph and his party. *I don't even want to imagine what Melfina will say if we let them die here.*

Right...well, let's get back on track. This is what we're going to do...



"Mist-san, I have a proposal."

"Oh? What sort of proposal?"

After our internal strategy meeting was over, it was time to start making preparations. For this plan, Mist-san's cooperation was absolutely necessary. If we succeeded, Toraj would be in our debt. And if Toraj was in our debt, it would make the possibility of getting our hands on rice that much greater.

I will secure my rice without fail!

::Master, leave the cooking to me! I will reproduce your recipes without fail!::

::The elusive food from my king's homeplace. I will materialize myself to enjoy its taste without fail!::

::Are you guys aware that you sometimes randomly insert rather idiotic comments out of the blue?::

United under a common purpose, all of us set off to complete our own parts of the plan.



Under the leadership of Kanzaki Touya, the Heroes had set out from the Holy

Empire of Deramis and, after a long journey, finally reached Toraj, the Country of Water. To understand why, one must travel back to the moment after Melfina, the Goddess of Reincarnation, granted a prophecy to Colette, the Oracle of Deramis.

When Touya and Setsuna reached the doors of the Great Cathedral, they bumped into Mizuoka Nana and Kuromiya Miyabi.

“Kanzaki-kun! What’s happened?!” cried Nana in a slightly flustered state.

This previous classmate of Touya’s was short, baby-faced, and had a very prominent bosom, which was an amalgam of traits that had proven extremely popular among a portion of the boys in their high school back home. She herself had a complex about this appearance that had often caused her to be mistaken for an elementary or middle schooler, but the combination of her appearance and gentle personality gave her a pleasant aura that many people found quite comforting and healing.

“We saw light coming from the Great Cathedral. Fireworks?”

In sharp contrast to Nana, Miyabi always seemed cool and composed. She was a returnee who had transferred into Touya’s class the day before they were all summoned. Due to how fast her almost genius-level mind ran, she often did and said things that seemed cryptic and incomprehensible to others. A quarter Russian, she had beautiful silver hair, and her looks were such that a fan club was rumored to have been established for her the very day she transferred in.

These two had been summoned, together with Touya and Setsuna, from modern Japan into another world, called to become Heroes.

“Good timing, you two. Honestly, I haven’t the faintest idea, either. What I *do* know is that Colette is inside.”

“What?! Then we should check on her!”

“Yep, that’s what we’ll be doing! When I open the door, all of us will rush in together. Ready? Set...”

BANG!

“Colette, are you all right?!”

In the direction Touya had yelled stood a silver-haired girl before an altar. Nothing appeared broken, and there were no signs of any struggle having taken place. The inside of the Great Cathedral was enveloped in complete silence, almost as if the intense light from a short while ago had been a mere lie. As the four Heroes looked around warily, Colette turned towards them and proclaimed in a sonorous voice, “We have been granted a prophecy!”

Setsuna was the first to respond. “By ‘prophecy,’ you mean Goddess Melfina was here?! What did she say?!”

This would be the first time that the goddess had made contact after their original transmigration. A faint hope that they might one day return home sparked within Setsuna’s chest, causing her to stare intently at Colette, awaiting her next words with bated breath. After what seemed like forever, Colette finally answered.

“One year it has been since Melfina-sama lent her aid in ensuring the successful summoning of the Heroes who would be our saviors. I had thought that I would never again have the blessed honor of receiving a prophecy, but now! Now another prophecy has been given to us! Ahh, Melfina-sama’s appearance is so holy, so divine, so beautiful, so precious! Her smile of joy upon beholding the Heroes’ growth was worth more than a thousand — nay, a *million* pieces of gold! For her to visit this humble servant not only once, but *twice*! Oh, Melfina-sama’s love and benevolence is so deep that I feel I might drown in it!”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

Colette was feeling such pleasure and delight that it looked like she was high on something. It was extremely rare to see the second highest authority of a country the size of Deramis in such an uncomposed state. If such a display were ever shown to the public, it would tarnish her reputation.



“Kanzaki-kun, Colette-san appears quite tired right now. We’ll help her to her room, so could you go back ahead of us?”

“O-Okay, sure. Want me to help carry her on my back?”

“Bzzt. Not an excuse for you to touch her. Touya’s a lucky lecher.”

“What! Miyabi, are you still holding a grudge against me for the other day?! I told you, I didn’t do it on purpo—”

“Miyabi-chan?! Did something happen between you and Kanzaki-kun?!”

“All right, all right, that’s enough of the *manzai* comedy act.”

Rubbing her temples to alleviate the headache she was getting, Setsuna did her best to bring things back under control. As a childhood friend of Touya the Walking Disaster, she had grown up facing such troublesome scenes more times than she could count. It was only natural that she would be constantly relegated to the role of mediator. If left alone, the other three would probably continue their banter ad infinitum, so it wasn’t as if she really had a choice. Rare was the day that Setsuna did not end up with a headache.

“The knights should be arriving soon, after hearing all that ruckus. Touya, you go deal with them. Nana and Miyabi, you two help me carry Colette! Come on, guys, get to it!”

“Understood!”

“Okay!”

“Aye, aye, siiir.”

Touya dashed out of the Great Cathedral first. Setsuna and the others departed soon after, carrying Colette.

“Oh, so beautiful! You are far too beautiful, Melfina-samaaa!”

That night, an official order went out barring anyone from entering Colette’s quarters.



Knock-knock.

“Come in.”

“Pardon my intrusion, Oracle.”

Putting down her pen, Colette looked up at the door. It was Cliff, the Knight Captain of the Holy Empire of Deramis’s acclaimed Holy Order of Knights. He was the most powerful warrior in all of Deramis and had therefore been entrusted with the training of the Heroes. Even after a year, his charges still could not beat him — even when fighting against him together in a four-versus-one match-up.

The four Heroes themselves stepped into the room just behind him.

“Knight Captain Cliff of the Holy Order of Knights, here at your service!”

“Be at ease. The reason I have called you and the Heroes here today is because I have an announcement to make: Melfina-sama has granted us another prophecy.”

The same words as yesterday, yet delivered in a completely different tone. This did not change the impact of the announcement, but Colette’s delirious state last night had been so impactful that Touya and the rest seemed at a loss as to how to respond. They exchanged looks, as if asking one another whether they should act surprised or not. Miyabi was quivering furiously, a tiny step away from bursting into outright laughter. Cliff, who did not know what had happened the day before, was the only one to look genuinely surprised.

“Is that true?! Oh, Oracle, what wonderful news! I shall inform the Pope immediately!”

“Wait a minute. Fath— I mean the Pope has already been informed.”

“I beg your pardon for my forwardness.”

“So, Colette, what did Goddess Melfina say?”

Trying her best not to think of the previous night, Setsuna pressed Colette for the details of the prophecy.

“I feel an evil presence from the Rizean Empire. Send the Heroes there. Ensure that they do not mistakenly go in the direction of Parth.”

“My Goddess!” exclaimed Cliff in even greater surprise.

“Knight Captain Cliff, the Rizean Empire is —”

“Indeed, the country on the Western Continent that we have had an armistice with for many years.”

Although Deramis and Rizea had signed the armistice, the wartime tensions between the two countries had yet to dissipate. The wedge that had been driven between them was not so easily overcome.

“If I remember correctly, we can cross over Crux Bridge to get there, right?”

“It’s not impossible, but the security there is extremely heavy and there are numerous checkpoints. Rizea is as much of a military country as Trycen is. If they find out that you are Deramis’s Heroes, there’s no telling what they’d do to you. Nowadays, the only people who use that bridge are pre-approved traveling merchants whose backgrounds have been thoroughly checked.”

“But according to Goddess Melfina’s prophecy, chances are high that the Demon Lord is in that empire, right? Are we really going to go there?”

Nana’s question caused everyone to fall silent. They might have spent the past year training and gaining experience, but at their cores, these four were simply high school students from a peaceful world. They could tell themselves again and again that they were ready to face the Demon Lord, but there was no telling if their resolve would hold when standing on an actual battlefield.

“Oracle, I believe this to be too early for them. Touya and the rest are not yet ready to face the Demon Lord, either in mind or body. In addition, we of the Holy Order of Knights will not be able to accompany them once they step beyond Deramis’s borders.”

“I understand your concern. However, this is a prophecy from Melfina-sama. Surely there is a deeper purpose to her words.”

Colette closed her eyes, thinking quietly. Silence enveloped the room, with the occasional gust of wind blowing in from the open windows. After a while, she opened her eyes again and said, “Let’s arrange for a ship to set off from Toraj.”



In the company of several knights, Touya and the others reached the border separating Deramis and Toraj. Along the way, the sight of the famous Heroes riding upon four white horses had turned the heads of every passerby, male and female alike. It was enough that even Cliff had jokingly said, “You guys are so conspicuous that there’s just no helping it, is there?” As an emergency measure, the four of them had finally donned hoods to cover their faces.

“I’m very sorry, Touya, but this is as far as we can escort you. Beyond this point is Toraj’s domain. Although our countries are on friendly terms, knights cannot enter without express permission.”

As the captain of the Holy Order of Knights, Cliff’s face was known by the top brass in many neighboring countries, Toraj included. Normally, an official request for permission to enter would have to be filed with Toraj so that the Holy Knights could enter along with the Heroes. This time, however, as the journey was meant to be top-secret, there hadn’t been enough time to cut past the necessary red tape beforehand.

“No, no, no, it’s already more than enough that you’ve escorted us all the way to the border! From here on, we will be relying on our own strength!”

Touya thanked Cliff with his inherently refreshing smile. The boy himself was full of confidence, but the same could not be said of one of his companions, Nana.

“This will be our first time leaving Deramis on our own. Are you sure we can handle it?”

During the past year, the bulk of the Heroes’ activities had been within Deramis. They had visited other countries with the knights on several occasions, but this was the first time they would be going abroad as a mere party of four. Nana felt as nervous about this as she had felt when entering her very first dungeon.

“In spite of what I said to the Oracle, I am truly impressed with the growth that all of you have shown. If I’m to be honest, I did not expect you to improve so fast, even considering your status as Heroes. In terms of sheer levels, you four can already stand toe-to-toe with the top-tier fighters of many countries.”

“But we’ve yet to win a single round against you,” said Miyabi. Although her

face was as expressionless as ever, her tone sounded slightly sulky. She was clearly displeased that in all their sparring matches thus far, she had yet to hit Cliff with her magic even once.

“Hahaha! Well, I *am* the strongest knight in all of Deramis, after all. You have all grown a lot, but I can’t let myself be surpassed just yet!”

“Hmph. We won’t lose next time.”

Setsuna accepted Cliff’s encouragement with grace, but she was fully aware of the marked difference in strength that remained between the Knight Captain and her group. Cliff was Level 84. According to Setsuna’s inquiries, the strongest fighters in the world, including the Beast King of Gaun, were all at a similar level. In contrast, Setsuna and her party members were barely past Level 60. They had managed their rapid growth over such a short period of time by clearing Deramis’s dungeons one after another at breakneck speeds, but they were still far from capable of seriously crossing swords with the real masters in each country.

We have to grasp something on this journey... Setsuna mused. *If I had to venture a guess, that is probably the reason behind Melfina-sama’s recent prophecy.*

The landscape of Toraj lay spread out before her eyes. Beyond this land, and beyond a big, wide ocean lay the Rizean Empire. Once again, she silently resolved to protect her friends no matter what.

After making small talk for a little longer and going over some final details for the coming leg of the journey, the Heroes finally parted with the knights and turned their horses in the direction of the capital of Toraj. Their first goal: find the Deramisian ship waiting for them in the port there.



Upon entering the city, the Heroes left their horses at a stable, then took a good look at the scenery around them. The cityscape, which was markedly different from the one back in Deramis, turned out to be a rather nostalgic sight for these four youngsters who had grown up in Japan.

“Doesn’t Toraj look kind of Japanese? Hey, want to take a look around town,

everyone?”

“Nana, we didn’t come here to sightsee. After we have an audience with the Queen of Toraj, we need to find the ship that Colette’s arranged for us, which’ll take us to the Western Continent,” Setsuna chided her, although as it turned out, Nana was not the only one barely containing her excitement.

“Come on, Setsuna. Just a bit won’t hurt, will it? Making small detours to gather information is one of the thrills of traveling.”

“To be carried out ASAP: gastro tour of the local cuisine until we drop.”

The highly curious Touya and the gluttonous Miyabi both raised their thumbs in a “good job!” pose. Just one look at them caused Setsuna to sigh heavily. She was already feeling exhausted by the trouble that she was convinced was coming.

“Setsuna-chan, taking a breather every once in a while is important too. Look, your brows are wrinkled in a frown again.”

Nana got on her tippy toes and reached up to smooth Setsuna’s brows while peering into her face.

That was the final blow. “O-Okay, I suppose...maybe I really have been pushing myself a bit too hard lately.” Considering Setsuna often gave way in the end, she was clearly quite a softie deep down.

Once their friend had folded under their powers of persuasion, the group decided to do a bit of sightseeing. They wandered all around town, spirits high. It was after about an hour of walking that they happened to pass by the Adventurer’s Guild. On a whim, Touya had looked up and spotted the guild’s sign.

“Hey, there are a large variety of quests that can be picked up at the Adventurer’s Guild, right?”

“Really? That means there might be people needing Kanzaki-kun’s help al—
mmf!”

Setsuna reacted in a split second to the words that Nana had nonchalantly spoken. Pushing her high Agility stat to its maximum effect, she clapped a hand

over Nana's mouth in a fluster.

"Mmmm!" cried Nana, looking at Setsuna in bewildered indignation.

"You can't say the word 'help' in front of Touya!" Setsuna hissed back. "If you do..." She shot a furtive look at their companion.

"People needing my help...people...who need my help!"

It was too late. Seeing stars practically shining in Touya's eyes, Setsuna gave up.

"Guys! Surely there are people who need my — no, who need *our* help as Heroes! And can we cross the sea without having extended a hand to those people? Of course not! Even one person would be fine! Let us protect the peaceful lives of the people of this city!"

"Kanzaki-kun!"

Touya had burst into a passionate speech, and Nana stared at him with passionate eyes. Miyabi looked on in amusement while gobbling down the snacks that filled both her hands. Even Setsuna, with all her years of experience standing next to Touya, was powerless to stop him once he entered his People-Helping Mode.

Given how smitten Nana was with Touya, surely she would delightedly go along with whatever he wanted to do. Miyabi? Setsuna never knew what Miyabi was thinking. At this point, there was no choice but to let Touya play the dashing hero until he was satisfied.

So much for 'just a little bit of sightseeing.' How much time are we going to lose from this?

Setsuna sighed again for what felt like the thousandth time that day.



At the same time, there were two pairs of eyes peeking at the Heroes from within the guild building. It was none other than Guildmaster Mist and a member of her staff.

"Guildmaster, it's looking like the Heroes are going to enter the guild even without us having to do anything."

“The original plan was for us to put on a bit of a show to get them to stop by, but...go inform the receptionists that we aren’t doing it anymore, and guide them straight to my room.”

Kelvin had come up with a brilliant script for the guild staff to use in an attempt to entice the Heroes to come inside, but with Mist’s words, it was forever buried without having seen the light of day.

Script aside, these clothes for the play really are amazing, Mist thought to herself. That maid whipped everything up on the spot in no time at all, but there are detailed motifs even in the smallest places, and the outfit comes with a buff to the Acting skill. It was all for naught in the end, but to be capable of creating equipment of this rank as if it’s nothing...

Knock-knock.

Oh, here they come.

Mist carefully put her costume away, then set about receiving her guests. Although the sequence of events had changed a bit, from here on out, she had a role to play.



“Hah? Karna’s squad isn’t back yet?”

“No, sir! The time for their regular contact has long passed, but not a single person from her squad showed up. We lit the signal for an emergency summons and yet there was still no response. Chief, could this mean something’s happened to Karna?”

Just as Christoph was about to help himself to the newly captured slaves for a bit of fun, one of his subordinates had run in bearing some very inconvenient news. Heading a bandit gang was much more comfortable than being an adventurer, but it was incredibly annoying that he had to give orders for everything himself. Christoph knew for a fact that if he left the bandits to their own devices, they would be traced and apprehended in no time at all.

“Karna’s squad was one of the ones in charge of kidnapping. That means she should’ve had a support squad accompanying her, right? What happened to those guys?”

“A mage support squad was supposed to have gone out with her, but we’ve received no contact from them, either.”

“What the hell is going on?” Christoph hissed angrily.

Did the Adventurer’s Guild catch on to Black Wind’s existence? That can’t be; I don’t think we’ve let anything slip so far. All the officers aside from Karna made it back safe and sound. And I told her to concentrate her activities on the areas around Parth, and to avoid places with high-ranked adventurers. Her squad and the support mages would be more than ten people altogether, all of whom are high-level. There shouldn’t have been any adventurers capable of wiping them out in that vicinity. Did they get greedy and move in on another area?

“There’s no choice. We’ll need to search Karna’s assigned territory ourselves.”

Among the officers currently here at headquarters, there are three Rank A adventurers from my party — Prislā, Hopper, and Ado — and four officers from the original Black Wind. On the off chance that something’s truly happened to Karna, I can’t send someone of a similar level to her. Hmm...in that case, Hopper should be just right.

“Get me Hopper! Now!”



“Ugh, why do I have to go and wipe someone else’s ass?”

A man with a small build and a baby face sluggishly plodded out of the room where he had just been ordered by his chief to lead the search party. There was no motivation whatsoever on his face.

“Christoph sure gets freaked out easily sometimes. Why is he getting so worked up over an easily replaceable officer? I’m busy with my hobby and all.”

“Hopper, were you torturing the women we captured again? You know the Chief will tear you a new one for doing that to the merchandise.”

His subordinate looked worried for him, but Hopper himself merely cackled loudly.

“You really don’t get it. There’s no music in this world more heavenly than the screams of women. It’s so valuable that you can’t just buy it with money, man.”

“I’m afraid...I don’t really get it. But putting your hobby aside for now, the search party is already waiting for you right outside the main entrance. All ten of them are over Level 30.”

“Huh! That’s a rather bold move for Christoph! Pretty much all of the top fighting strength we’ve currently got here at headquarters, isn’t it?”

“It just shows how serious the Chief is about all this. Considering you’re heading out there yourself, I can’t help but feel a bit sorry for the other side.”

This underling of Hopper’s was actually a beast of a warrior himself at Level 34. Having served long and well as Hopper’s right-hand man, many were expecting him to be promoted to an officer sometime soon.

Hopper and his fellow bandit joked and laughed as they walked down the passageway. Just one last turn around a corner and they would be at the main entrance. Black Wind’s top elites would be gathered outside, ready to sortie at a moment’s notice.

“How awesome would it be if it turns out to be a cute girl?”

“We’re talking about an opponent that might have defeated Karna, right? Chances of that are probably very sli— hmm?”

The underling, who was walking ahead and therefore had gotten a look at the entrance first, suddenly stopped in his tracks. Hopper, whose thoughts were churning with erotic fantasies, failed to notice in time, and he ended up bumping into the other man’s back.

“Ow! What’s the matter? Why’d you stop like that?!”

“Um, I’m sorry, boss. I was just surprised ’cus I don’t see anyone outside. That’s really strange. I’m pretty sure the summons went out...”

“Come on, get your shit together, all right? What would you do if the delicate gray cells of my brain got injured fr—”

Hopper, who possessed the Magic Detection skill, noticed that something was off the moment he pushed past his subordinate and stepped through the entranceway, which was wide enough for ten adults to walk through abreast. There was a thin veil of magic covering the entrance. A spell had been cast over

it.

“Watch out! Someone’s here!” Hopper immediately shouted in warning. However, there was no reply. “Dude, you listening?!”

Irritated at not hearing a response, Hopper quickly turned around. To his shock, instead of seeing the other man standing behind him, what he saw was a knight in pitch black armor, holding a sword dripping red. At the knight’s foot was the bandit’s corpse, lying in a spreading pool of blood, having been brutally cut down.

Wh...when did he get behind me?!

Hopper’s beloved sword was in his hand before he knew it. As a specialist with sensing and detection skills, he was extremely sensitive to changes in his surroundings and danger heading his way. It was in acknowledgment of this that Christoph had selected Hopper to lead the search party. But in spite of those skills, Hopper had failed to notice his own subordinate being killed right behind him. In his mind, this was an absolute impossibility.

“Sorry about that. We’re in a bit of a hurry on some personal business. But you guys use these types of tactics all the time, right? You don’t get to call it cowardly or unfair.”

Hopper heard a male voice coming from behind. However, he could not bring himself to turn around once again. Regardless of how much danger he knew that voice posed to him, he could not tear his eyes away from the black knight that his Danger Detection skill was reacting so violently towards.

Shit, shit, shit, shit! There are two more people of similar strength to the black knight standing right behind me!

Hopper used his Presence Sensing skill to take stock of the situation as best he could. A man, presumably the one who had just spoken, was standing directly in front of the entrance and blocking it. Behind him and slightly off to the side was the presence of another person who was emitting a frightening amount of fighting spirit. Lastly, off to the other side, just out of sight in the connected passageway, was a pile of bodies, very likely those of the elite force that Hopper was supposed to be leading.

“Well, that should be enough time for you to understand the situation you’re in, right? Judging from your level, you’re a Black Wind officer? And the fact that you’re hiding your face behind a mask probably means that you’re one of the so-called ‘Champions of Trycen,’ I’d wager. You know, we staked out the entrance hoping that the big bad would come out eventually, but we only ever got the lackeys. They didn’t even have any useful information! We’ve just been oh so bored.”

Hopper listened carefully as the man continued to talk in the excited tone of a child who had gotten his hands on a new toy. Or rather, he felt frozen in place, unable to do anything but stay put and listen.

He said ‘judging from your level,’ so does that mean he possesses Analyze Eye? And to sound so composed even after seeing my stats at Level 62...is he a Rank S adventurer?! How does he know my identity?! That’s not something that can be deduced from my title!

Hopper’s thoughts whirled at maximum speed as he desperately grasped for a means of escape. However, no good ideas came to mind, and he only grew increasingly more bewildered with time.

“So, what are you going to do? If you want to fight, I’d love to keep you company. If you’re willing to hand over all the information you know—”

“CHIEF, INTRUDERS! LIKELY RANK S, AND THEY KNOW WHO WE ARE!”

“Smart choice. You may be rotten, but I guess you have the decision-making skills of a Rank A after all. Not that it’ll help you, of course.”

The course of action that Hopper had finally decided on was to pass on the information at risk to his own life. Naturally, the black knight moved in response to this. The rapier that Hopper held was met by the knight’s greatsword. The exchange took but a split second, with the bandit’s sword never even reaching the knight. The greatsword sliced through both Hopper’s rapier and his body with unbelievable speed. The last sound that Hopper ever heard was not the scream of a woman, but his own death rattle.

“Too bad for you, but I’ve cast Silent Whisper on the entrance to your little hideout. If you’re not familiar with that one, it basically cuts off sound. In other words, your voice reached...nobody.”

The man's merciless declaration no longer registered in Hopper's ears.



"Guess things don't always go as well as we hope," murmured Gerard as he brandished his greatsword. The motion caused all the blood clinging to his weapon to fly off and splatter onto the ground, reverting the Dainsleif to its original pristine shine.

"Summoning you behind the enemy as a surprise attack...seems like the bottleneck is the amount of time needed for the Summoning itself. This is true of the light of the magic circle too, but those possessing Magic Detection could easily sense the spell and move away in time. It's hard to gauge the right timing."

"How about using it together with Concealment somehow, my king?"

What we had just tried was a surprise attack strategy utilizing the Summoning skill. The moment the masked man had stepped through the entrance, I had Summoned Gerard behind the underling who had been trying to follow him out. By attacking immediately after being Summoned, Gerard had managed to catch the guy entirely off guard and end him with a single slash.

Additionally, by cloaking the entrance in the Rank B Green Magic spell Silent Whisper, I had effectively put up a barrier that prevented sound from passing through. No noises made inside the hideout would be heard outside, with the same being true vice versa. That was why the thug hadn't been able to sense his fellow bandit being killed.

"So, how much longer are we going to be staking out this silly hole? I'm bored already," grumbled Sera, standing with her legs spread, arms on her hips, and lips in a pout.

"Didn't you already enjoy yourself plenty during the fight just now?! I'm *very* glad I cast Silent Whisper. In any case, it seems these two were the last people heading for the entrance. It's about time we take the initiative."

Thanks to Presence Sensing, I had a pretty good handle on the positions of everyone inside the hideout. Those who hadn't taken a single step since we arrived were, in all likelihood, kidnapping victims being held there.

“What should we do with the Black Wind members that we killed, Master? I’m afraid letting the Heroes see them would complicate matters.”

Dispelling her Covert Action state, Efil stepped out from the shadow of the entrance. While the rest of us had been sealing the passage and waiting to pounce on Black Wind members coming out, she had been keeping an eye on our surroundings. For all we knew, there could have been an assault squad that just happened to be returning at the same time. Thanks to the Farsight skill she possessed, she would have been able to spot such a force coming from miles away.

“We’ll just let Clotho Absorb them. Please and thank you, Clotho.”

The tiny figure of Clotho permanently perched on Efil’s shoulder jiggled once and spawned a clone. As we had already gathered the bodies together in one place, the slime simply bounced over, expanded in size, and swallowed the entire pile in one gulp.

Just like us, Clotho had leveled up significantly thanks to the fight with Viktor. It had then used its newly-earned SP to acquire two new skills: Dismantle and Metallicize. The Dismantle skill was for stripping usable materials from monster corpses while Absorbing them. Ranking up this skill would yield even more materials than could be normally obtained and increase the possibility of acquiring particularly rare materials. In Clotho’s case, the slime could swallow up targets with Gluttony, then send all the resulting materials through Dismantle and straight into Storage.

To our surprise, the Dismantle skill could also be used on human corpses. We had no intention of doing anything as grotesque as using human materials, but the skill was capable of transferring the equipment the corpses were wearing straight to Storage. *You go, Clotho-san!*

“Hey, you found a key ring?”

After Absorbing the masked man, Clotho telepathically informed me of a key ring that had entered its Storage.

“If I may, Master, might these not be the keys for the headquarters interior? The masked man appeared to be an officer, after all.”

“Which means our search will go real fast with this in hand!” cried Sera.
“Clotho, well done! Let’s move it!”

“Sera, is rampaging the only thing on your mind? Remember, this is supposed to be a covert mission. If the other side is alerted to our intrusion and takes the captives as hostages, it’ll become a lot more annoying to sort things out.”

“You spoilsport.”

“Come on, don’t sulk.”

It was, however, quite disappointing how weak the Rank A adventurer had been. I had confirmed his Status with Analyze Eye, and it had turned out to be inferior to the Heroes’ Statuses that Melfina had shared with us. Level-wise, this Hopper fellow was above the Heroes, but the growth of his skills was fairly stunted. *Or is he normal, with the Heroes being the anomalies?*

“All right then, let’s dive into their hideout, just as you said. But Sera, remember: it’s fine to fight, but always be on the lookout for traps with your detection skills. Got it?”

“Of course! I’m all over it!”

“Ooookay. Sure.”

Although she was extremely capable, Sera had a very straightforward personality that made me worry for her sometimes. *Goodness, what am I going to do with this battle junkie?*



“Kelvin, that patch of stone pavement is slightly discolored, see? Stepping on it will trigger a trap, so watch out.”

“Oh, right.”

“Mm, the lass has a discerning eye.”

“Thanks to Sera-san, we are able to proceed without worry.”

“All thanks to her indeed.”

Sorry, Sera, please forgive stupid old me for doubting you again!

Once we actually headed into Black Wind’s hideout, Sera fully utilized all of

her sensing and detection skills to expose every single trap, both mechanical and magical, that had been set up on the path we were taking. Gerard and Efil were also quite impressed. *Guess I should do a bit of self-reflection.*

“What’s the matter, Kelvin? You’ve been looking deep in thought for a while now.”

“Hm? I was just thinking how great it is that you’ve become our comrade, Sera.”

The high-spirited demon girl poked her head in front of mine inquisitively, so I reflexively reached out to pat it. Her silky fire-red hair felt wonderful, but in a way that was totally different from Efil’s.

“Where in the world did that come from? Sheesh...”

Sera looked away, her face bright red. But the fact that she silently let me continue probably meant that she didn’t dislike the head pats.

That said, we were deep in enemy territory, and Efil was starting to look at me like she wanted to be patted too. Being able to change gears quickly was certainly an important skill.

We continued to explore the hideout while freeing the captured women we found along on the way. I would first scan a room with Presence Sensing, then erect Silent Whisper, then we would clear said room. The ring of keys that we’d taken from Hopper did indeed offer access to the various rooms throughout the bandits’ headquarters, and we were able to steadily conquer the place without any trouble as a result.

Most of the kidnapping victims were simply locked up in cells, but there were some who had suffered excessive sexual violence or who had been tortured and were in a state that I couldn’t allow Efil or Sera to see. Gerard and I focused on handling those rooms alone, with me casting Clean on the victims and Recovery Circle on the floor of the room before moving on.

We couldn’t very well bring the civilians along while we fought, so we instructed them to hide in one of the rooms and left a Clotho clone behind as a bodyguard.

“Thank you, big brother!” managed one of the little girls we had rescued.

Despite being incredibly weak and barely conscious, she did her best to give us a smile.

The girl was one of those whose body bore marks of torture. Her physical injuries had been healed by my magic, but her mental recovery would likely take time. Such atrocities were unforgivable, especially when perpetrated by those being lionized as “champions.”

“Looks like this is the last room.”

I could sense three people within. While making our way through the hideout, we had not encountered anyone besides Hopper who had seemed like they might be an adventurer, so chances were good that these three were the “champions” in question.

Now then. I feel it's just about time for a well-deserved punishment.



“So, what the hell’s going on? I finally had some time to myself!”

“I’ll get straight to the point. It seems one of our kidnapping squads might have been wiped out.”

When Priscilla and Ado arrived, Christoph immediately explained the situation. By the time he told them about Karna’s squad never returning to the hideout, and how he had sent Hopper out to search the area, Priscilla had become extremely agitated.

“Wh-What are you doing?! Have you forgotten that we’re here on a top-secret mission from our home country?!”

“Keep your voice down! What’re you going to do if the guys outside hear you?!”

As always, the three of them were wearing black masks to hide their faces from their fellow Black Wind members. Hopper had done the same as well. Someone who could see their Statuses directly with Analyze Eye was one thing, but in general, the four ringleaders were not particularly famous so far from Trycen.

Thanks to a court mage who was dispatched from their home country to alter

the memories of all Black Wind members, as long as the four adventurers kept their masks on, the bandits would continue to think of Christoph as their rightful boss without giving it a second thought. Unfortunately, the officers were a bit tougher than the rest, and memory alteration didn't work as well on them, so they were in the know about the Chief being switched out. However, their minds had been scrambled in such a way that they were unable to question the change or even recall the name of their new leader.

Even so, if one of those officers were to be caught and interrogated, they knew enough to land Christoph and his party in very hot water.

“But what if — just *what if* Karna spills the beans about us? Then Gaun — no, all three other countries — and the Adventurer's Guild too! — all of them would be after us, wouldn't they?! If that happens, we won't remain champions. Even worse, we could be branded as traitors! Why is this happening after we've only just gotten started?!”

In sharp contrast to Priscilla's hysterics, Ado merely sat in silence, eyes closed, muscular arms crossed.

“Ado! Can you say something too? Our fates are on the line here!”

“All I want is to fight against strong opponents. I make my own fate.”

“Ugh, this musclebrain!”

“Calm down, Priscilla! This is why I've dispatched Hopper to prevent any of those things from happening. Right now, we need to confirm the situa—”

Bam! Bam!

As Christoph was trying to calm Priscilla down, there was a loud pounding on the door. They both started at the sound, then turned their heads towards the noise.

“What is it?!”

“Chief, it's me. I've got an urgent report from Hopper.”

“Huh, that was fast! That bastard sure does the job well when he puts his mind to it.”

“But what could be so urgent? Is it something bad?”

“Bad news is still information, right? Come on in and make your report.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

Click. Slowly, oh so slowly, the door swung open. In the corridor stood Christoph’s direct subordinate...with a sword through his abdomen. The handle of the sword was held by a young man clad entirely in black. It looked like there were a few others with him too.

“Why...? I did as you asked...you said...you would spare me...”

“Ahh, yeah, sorry, but that was a lie. We have absolutely no intention of letting a single one of you live.”

With those words, the stranger swung his sword, bisecting the bandit’s torso as easily as cutting through paper. The top half of the body flew towards Christoph and landed with empty eyes staring vacantly up at him.

“What the hell?”

Christoph examined the intruder. Black hair, black robe, with matching shirt and pants underneath. A closer look at the sword revealed it to be a staff wreathed in magic. He had mistaken what it was at first since the magic was so condensed that it was visible to the naked eye.

“Hey there, ‘champions.’ Looks like you guys have been up to quite a bit of mischief, haven’t you?”

The man was smiling, but his eyes were cold. Thanks to their wealth of experience as adventurers, Christoph and his party could tell at first sight that this fellow was very bad news.



“Hey there, ‘champions.’ Looks like you guys have been up to quite a bit of mischief, haven’t you?”

After taking care of the last Black Wind bandit, we faced off against the adventurers who had taken over the gang. I wasted no time in using Analyze Eye on all of them and uploading the data to the Follower Network. I also stepped aside to let Gerard and Sera enter the room.

“You bastards forced my man to disable the trap on the door?”

According to his Status, this was Christoph, the mastermind behind the operation. The woman with jewelry jangling over every part of her body was Priscilla, and the guy with a shaved head and monk-like attire was Ado. Based on their Statuses, it seemed like Ado was going to be more troublesome as an opponent than Christoph himself.

“Oh, you mean the *really* powerful explosive magic circle? Nah, disabling it seemed like too much work, so we just had the dude sleeping over there open the door for us instead. Not like we had much choice, since the key is a fake, right?”

I chucked the ring of keys we’d taken from Hopper onto the floor. Although they did, in fact, open the vast majority of doors throughout the hideout, a remark about the boss’s room key being a fake had come up when I used Analyze Eye on it. If we had tried to open the door with the dummy key, it would have triggered a lethal trap. Of course, Sera’s detection skills would have picked up on the trap’s existence without the tip-off, anyway.

“This is Hopper’s...?”

“Good guess. No need to worry about him now, though. So then, Christoph, Priscilla, and Ado...what are you ‘Champions of Trycen’ doing here with a bunch of bandits? Is kidnapping part of a champion’s duty?”

“All right, so you already know our real identities,” sighed Christoph, removing his mask.

My first impression of his face was...well, he kind of looked like a bear. *Is it just me, or does he look much more like a bandit than a champion?*

“As you have pointed out, yes, I am Christoph. Seeing as you already know so much about us, I take it you’re also the one who did in Karna’s group?”

“Who knows?”

“Heh, playing dumb. Okay.”

Seeing that Christoph had already revealed his face, Priscilla and Ado followed suit and took off their own masks.

“Hmph! Now that you’ve learned our true identities, you won’t be leaving

here alive. I don't know who you are, but we'll grant you the honor of witnessing the strength of Rank A adventurers firsthand!" cried Priscilla as she powered her jewels up with magic.

Ado also brought his spear to bear. "Opponents of your caliber are hard to come by. Let us exult in the fight."

"And there you have it. Looks like you guys have gotten a bit full of yourselves after defeating Hopper and my other subordinates, but we conquer tough opponents every day. You'll regret having come here down to the very marrow of your bones as we dispatch you from this world!"

Christoph reached for a greataxe hanging on the wall, which fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

Look at that, they've already recovered from the shock. These people sure do change gears quickly. Hopper was the same way. Seems they've got the mental fortitude worthy of their rank, at least.

"By some stroke of fate, there are three of us, and there are three of you. So let us decide victory and defe— PRISCILLA, DODGE!"

"Huh?"

Thunk.

Things had already taken their course by the time Ado finished shouting.

"Wait, what?! You're kidding, right?"

"Ugh..."

Sera and Gerard had attacked Priscilla and Ado, respectively, at the same time. With a single smooth motion, all of Priscilla's jewels were shattered and Ado's spear crumbled to pieces.

"To be honest, I had been looking forward to some exciting combat, myself. But the revolting things that I saw on the way here made me change my mind. This is not going to be a 'fight,' it's going to be a punishment," I spat while studying the remains of the items on the floor. "Rank A Magical Jewels and a Rank A Cataract Lance, a spear capable of taking whatever form its user wishes? Hmm, those are pretty nice equips. Sorry for destroying them."

The objects that had been floating in the air while Priscilla was pouring magic into them were called Magical Jewels, and were support items used by mages to amplify their own magical power. The type of jewel determined the effects and ranking of the item, with diamond being the most powerful at Rank A, ruby at Rank B, and sapphire and emerald at Rank C. There were others, too, but those can be left for another time.

Priscilla had been using diamonds. One could only imagine how stunned she was to see them destroyed in the blink of an eye.

“M-My jewels!!”

“We’re in the middle of a fight, Priscilla! Eyes forward!”

“Too late.”

Christoph’s warning proved meaningless as Sera’s hand slammed onto the back of Priscilla’s neck. The woman’s eyes rolled up into her head, and she instantly lost consciousness.

Aahh, the neck chop that I’ve only ever seen in manga and anime before! It’s my first time witnessing it in real life. I guess possessing Combat Technique at Rank S makes Sera capable of anything she wants. Maybe I should ask her to teach me a few moves when we have time.

::Hey, Kelvin. This is a really boring way to end things. Can I play with her for a bit instead?::

As long as you don’t kill her. See if you can extract some information while you’re at it.

::Sure thing!:: Sera replied in a singsong tone. With the unconscious Priscilla under her arm, she merrily exited the room. Given the speed she was moving at, Christoph and Ado didn’t even have time to react.

Efil, could you accompany Sera and keep an eye on her?

::Understood, Master.::

Efil left her post in the corridor, where she had been keeping a lookout until then.

“All right, that’s one down. Ah, don’t worry, we won’t go so far as to kill you.

We need you alive so that we can put you where you ought to be.”

Christoph laughed scornfully. “Talking like you’ve already won? If you guys are adventurers, you should know never to let down your guard. Ado!”

“Pierce, Cataract Lance!”

The scattered pieces of Ado’s weapon suddenly melted as if they were liquid, reforming into spears of water that shot towards Gerard. On top of having Spear Mastery at a high rank, their enemy also possessed Blue Magic, the skill related to the manipulation of water and ice. The combination gave him great physical compatibility with his weapon and even greater magical compatibility with it, since the spear was created from highly condensed water. His signature attack was also great at catching opponents off guard. But unfortunately for Ado, I had already conveyed all available information about his spear to Gerard.

“Your control is good, but regrettably, you are far too slow.” Gerard accurately cut down each and every spear of water that flew his way. There wasn’t a shred of hesitation in his movements.

“Hey, hey, hey, you sure about throwing your magic all over the place like that?” I asked, somewhat amused.

“What are you...?! Cataract Lance, return!” In a fluster, Ado quickly called back the water, which reformed in his hand as a solid spear.

He’s pretty quick on the uptake.

“Ado, what are you doing?!” shouted Christoph. “Don’t stop your attack!!”

“There was no point in continuing that move. The bastard completely saw through it, and maintaining the assault would only have been a waste of MP. On top of which...look.”

“Look at wh— that’s?!”

The spear in Ado’s hand was only two-thirds of its original length.

“Hey, asshole, you did something to the magic of Cataract Lance with that sword of yours, didn’t you?”

“Hm, you have a good eye.”

As our opponent had guessed, Gerard's sword, Dainsleif, was capable of absorbing magic through its blade. It was a very powerful ability that could gouge away a significant amount of MP with a mere brush. I had experienced the effect firsthand while I was forging the damn thing, so there was no doubt about it. The MP that was absorbed could be either directed towards the sword's own attack power or released as a wave of energy.

Gerard's previous fighting style was one that rarely used magic, so this feature of his sword had actually increased his repertoire of attacks significantly. The general function of the sword's ability was similar to Clotho's skill, but whereas Absorption was more like a "damage over time" attack, with a wide area of effect thanks to the large volume of Clotho's body, Dainsleif's power was more of a single target burst-damage attack. The reason Ado's Cataract Lance had become shorter was because Gerard had parried it with Dainsleif several times, stealing MP from it with every single blow.

"It's truly a pity that one as skilled as yourself has fallen into a life of depravity," sighed Gerard.

"This body of mine is solely dedicated to combat," Ado replied with a rasping laugh. "I don't care where I am as long as I get to fight, and me being here is a result of that. Thanks to my choices, I have now met my greatest opponents ever: you and your party. I am convinced yet again that the path I chose was not a mistake at all."

"Is that so? Then I suppose there is no need for any more words. This is the end."

Gerard swung his sword once again, with true force this time. Although Ado had been able to react easily enough to the other attacks, he fell unconscious at once, without having time to register what had happened.

"I used the flat of my sword," Gerard said to the fallen man. "Your MP has been completely drained, but be glad that you kept your life."

Ado's armor, which had Rank A specs, had entirely caved in. Even though Gerard had gone easy on him, his opponent had still suffered significant damage.

"Th-That's impossible! Ado was the strongest fighter in our party!! To beat

him like, like, like...”

“I told you, didn’t I? This is not a fight, but a punishment. You guys never had a chance of winning.”

I cast Radiance Lance at Christoph’s legs.

“ARRRRHHHHHHHH!”

As intended, the holy spears of light pierced both of his feet, nailing them to the ground.

“You bastard!! Don’t think for a second you’re going to get away with doing this to a Champion of Trycen!!”

“I don’t expect to. This is likely going to cause diplomatic conflicts between Trycen and Toraj. Without solid evidence, me being a mere adventurer isn’t going to do much to alleviate the situation.”

“If you understand that, then why...”

“What do you mean ‘why’? Champion or not, when you commit a crime, you become a criminal. Even children know this. Don’t tell me this is news to you?”

“That’s not what I’m asking! I meant —”

“Hey, man, who cares about the details, right? We still have time. Until then, let’s continue this little punishment of ours, shall we?”

The pale-faced Christoph watched in horror as I pierced his body with a third Radiance Lance.



About two hours after I began Christoph’s punishment, Sera returned with Priscilla once again under her arm. Judging from how the latter wasn’t moving a muscle, Sera’s ‘playtime’ must have been quite intense indeed. Of course, the same could be said for Christoph and Ado, who were lying on the floor in a similar state. There wasn’t a single wound on their bodies thanks to my White Magic, so at least there were no worries on that front. There was zero risk of them dying. I had made sure to hold back while I was meting out their punishments.

As a safety precaution, I had told all of my party members to speak through the Network while we were there, just in case any of our enemies were only pretending to be unconscious and heard something we didn't want them to hear. They might think us strange, seemingly sitting around in total silence, but we couldn't care less about what they thought.

It shouldn't be much longer now...

::Kelvin, I'm tired of just waiting around.::

::Would you like to take over as lookout, Sera-san?::

::Lookout's too troublesome! I'll leave that to you, Efil.::

::I feel like your skill set is more suitable for lookout than mine, though, Sera-san.::

::Shall I take over? It seems like Efil might be getting tired —:: Just as Gerard was about to stand up, four signals triggered the Presence Sensing that I had set up around the hideout. Presumably, it was the four Heroes.

::They're here.::

::They're here!::

Sera and I nodded at each other, then passed the information on to Gerard, Efil, and Clotho, who still had a clone in place to protect the kidnapping victims.

We had already explained to the women that Clotho was a monster under my control, so hopefully they would convey that to the Heroes if the two groups happened to meet. Even if the Heroes decided to attack it, Clotho had diverted a large portion of its strength to the clone, which would enable it to slip away if necessary.

We had also cleared all obstacles from the entrance of the hideout to the room that we were currently in, so the Heroes finding us wasn't likely to take much time at all.

All right, guys, let's get ready to greet the Heroes of Deramis.



After readily accepting Mist's request for aid, Touya and the others

discovered Black Wind's hideout based on the information they'd been given, and successfully infiltrated the place posthaste. Of course, Black Wind had already been completely eradicated, so calling their mission a "success" would be giving them a bit too much credit.

As the party continued deeper into the hideout, doubt started to creep onto Nana's face. "Um, guys, isn't it kind of weird how we haven't seen anyone at all so far? Mist-san said that a party of Rank A adventurers had gone ahead of us, didn't she? Could it be that we've gone to the wrong place?"

"I don't think so. We've already checked the entire vicinity and concluded that this is the only suspicious-looking hideout around, right? Setsuna, are you getting anything from the Presence Sensing skill you recently picked up?"

"My skill rank is still pretty low, so I can't be sure, but...it feels like there's a big group gathered farther ahead. I can't feel anything beyond that, though, so we might have to go a bit deeper first."

"Let's head to where that group is. Maybe they're the ones who got captured."

"Agreed," piped up Miyabi in support of Touya's suggestion.

"Something really doesn't seem right here. There's no sign of battle, and there are no bodies anywhere. We need more information; therefore, we need to prioritize finding the others."

"All right, then. I'll take the lead. Everyone keep your guard up."

With Setsuna in front, the Heroes headed for what seemed like the only place in the hideout where anyone might still be alive. They kept a sharp eye out for traps, but strangely, all of the traps they came across had been disabled. With nothing in their way, their progression was quite fast, and soon enough, they reached the room they had been heading for.

"Everyone, we've arrived."

"We didn't see anyone or anything on the way here. That actually seems *more* suspicious to me. My Danger Detection never went off along the way, either," commented Nana.

“We have no choice, though. We have to check this out, right? I’ll go in first. Girls, back me up.”

“Girls are courageous. Handle on the fly.”

After a quick retort — “Uh, I’m a guy though...” — Touya vigorously threw the door open and rushed in. He was first greeted by the sight of a group of females who had presumably been kidnapped by Black Wind. Thankfully, all of them looked unharmed. Several of them seemed startled by Touya’s sudden entrance.

“Sorry for surprising you! We’ve come to save y—”

In the middle of his apology, Touya’s eyes fell on something else. Its small size — it only reached the height of his knee — was probably why he hadn’t noticed it at once.

On the floor right beside him was a jiggling blue slime.

“A monster! Shit, everyone get down!”

Touya immediately identified the slime as an enemy and brought his sword to bear. This blade, which he had received from the Pope who reigned over Deramis, was a weapon that had been used by generations of Heroes, the Holy Sword Will. With the ability to power up by resonating with its wielder’s personal will, this was a legendary weapon that had saved many Heroes from nigh impossible situations. Each swing was powerful enough to kill. However, Touya never managed to bring the sword down.

“DON’T DO THAT!”

“Huh?!”

A little girl leaped out from the ring of victims to stand between Touya and the slime. Her sudden movement caused him to stop his sword mid-swing.

“This pet belongs to the big brother who saved us! Don’t bully it!”

“B-Big brother?!”

With no consideration for Touya’s confusion, the girl continued to make cute little angry noises. A woman who seemed to be her mother came over to her in a fluster.

“I’m very sorry about that. She’s become such a fan of the adventurers who saved us. You see, that slime is a companion of those same adventurers; that’s why my daughter jumped out without thinking.”

“Is that so? Sorry, then I was in the wrong.”

Touya crouched down and apologized to the girl, but she continued to glare at him angrily. At this point, Setsuna and the others had also filed into the room, drawn by the commotion.

“Ruka, the young man has already apologized, hasn’t he? Um...are all of you here with the group that saved us earlier?”

“Ahh, yes, of course. We are —”

“Touya, we should probably keep our identities a secr—”

“— the Heroes of Deramis.”

“OH MY GOD, THE ESTEEMED HEROES?!”

As always, Setsuna’s warning came a beat too late, and shrill squeals from the women around them drowned her voice out entirely. She had to retreat to a corner of the room, sighing and rubbing her temples as Touya was instantly mobbed. It took a while for the situation to calm back down.

By then, Nana had used her Animal Communication skill to converse with the creature directly. “Kanzaki-kun, I had a talk with the slime. It says it’s been ordered to protect these women as its master went on ahead to the deepest part of this hideout to defeat the leader of Black Wind. It assured me that we can leave these women in its care, and asked us to go help with the fight against the bandits’ boss.”

“They have a Tamer in their party too? What a weird choice, to Tame a slime.”

“Touya, that’s hardly the point here! We should be thinking about what we’ll be doing next.”

“Escort the captives out? Back up the adventurers? Which is best?”

“If I may, esteemed Heroes, I implore you to follow the adventurers. Although they are Rank A, their victory is far from guaranteed. Please lend them your

strength!”

“Ehh, big brother doesn’t need help! And I want to go back with him!” cried the little girl.

The girl’s mother lowered her head deeply in supplication. Naturally, there was no way that Mr. I-love-helping-people Touya could say no.

“All right! Leave it to us, ladies!”

There wasn’t an iota of hesitation in his response.



“There’s been no danger at all this whole time...”

“Is it just me, or is this starting to feel like a trap? If the adventurers who went ahead of us defeated all of the Black Wind members, why haven’t we seen any bodies lying around?”

The Heroes had finally reached the door of what was clearly the boss’s room, still without any encounters or mishaps along the way.

“Sensing anyone in there?”

“There are seven people inside. The question is, are they the officers or adventurers? Or both? Mist-san mentioned that there are only three adventurers, so that would mean they’re fighting with a disadvantage in numbers.”

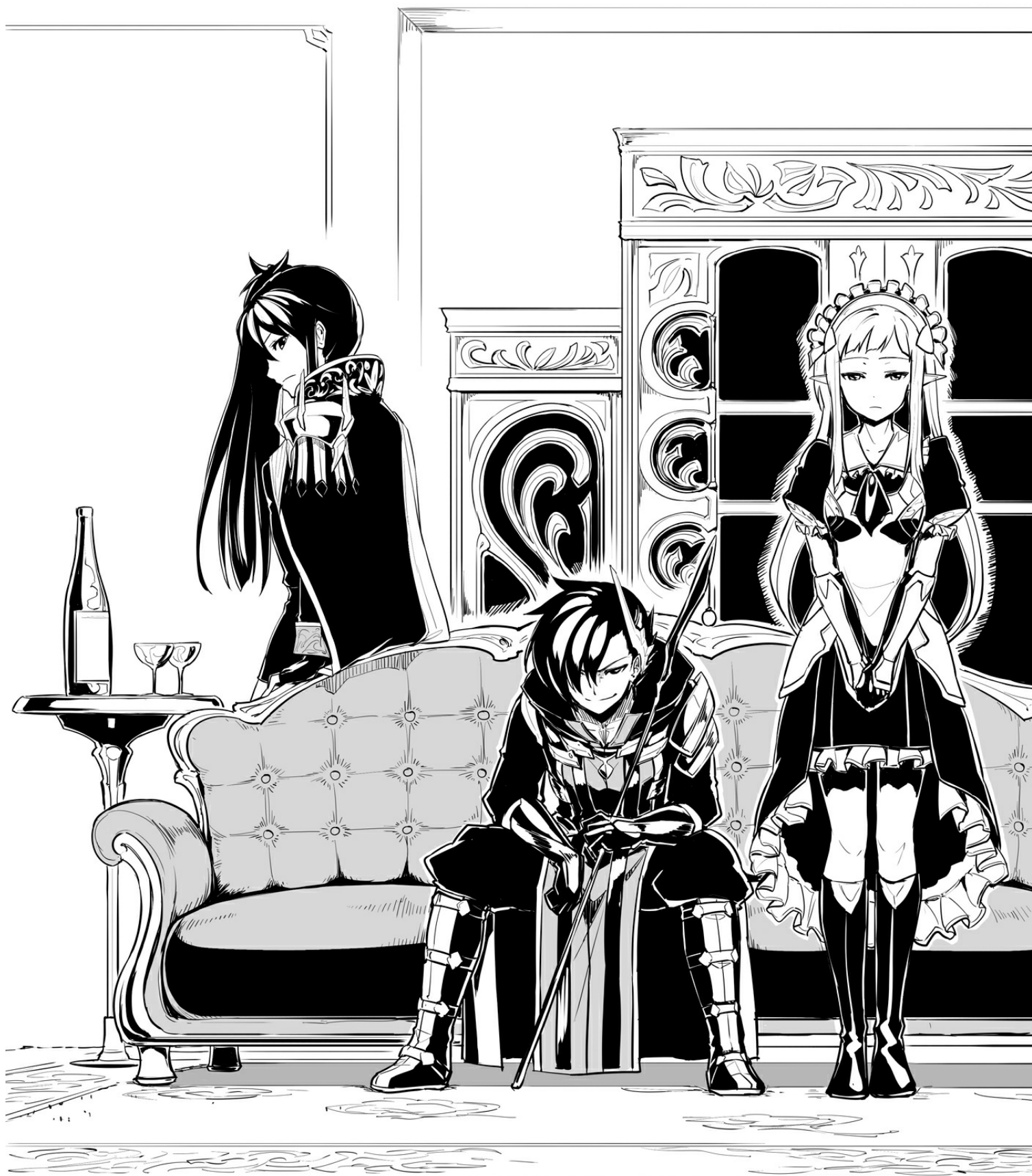
“Then we have to save them now!” shouted Touya, charging in.

“You idiot! How many times do I have to tell you to think before you act!” Setsuna followed close on his heels, and so did Nana and Miyabi a moment later.

As Setsuna ran into the room, she heard Touya shout, “LOWER THAT SWORD!” Looking over, she saw three people in adventurer attire lying on the floor. Looming above them was a huge suit of black armor that was about to swing down a massive greatsword and finish them all off.

Farther into the room was a man in a black robe, sitting on a sofa, flanked by a maid and a woman in military uniform. All three of their outfits were primarily

black in color.



Touya's shout immediately drew the gazes of everyone in the room.

As if speaking for the group, the black-robed man asked, "What? Who're you guys supposed to be?"

In response, Touya took a step forward, drawing in a deep breath. Once again, Setsuna tried to stop him, but —

"We are the Heroes of Deramis!"

In spite of her high Agility stat, her rate of success at stopping trouble before it occurred was actually rather pitiful.

"Again and again, you spill such important information like it's nothing!"

"Calm down, Setsuna-chan, calm down!"

Touya hadn't thought twice before revealing their identities to those who were likely their enemies. Feeling the veins on her forehead pop out a bit, Setsuna looked around the room to take stock of the situation.

The ones on the ground are likely the Rank A adventurers who went on ahead of us. That would make these four the Black Wind officers. It looks like we arrived just as they were about to finish off the adventurers. Things would have gone sideways if we had arrived even a moment later. That would have broken the little girl's heart.

"Heroes of Deramis? The ones supposedly summoned by the Oracle?"

"That's right!" Touya pointed his sword at the man. "Bandit gang Black Wind, we have come to defeat you!"

"Hm? Ahh, reinforcements? I'm afraid you're too late, though. Gerard?" The black-robed man threw his hand up in a signal, prompting his armored companion to turn back to the three victims lying on the ground.

"Esteemed Heroes! Please save us! They're going to kill us!"

"Th-These people...they did whatever they wanted with my body! Please avenge me!"

Without warning, two of the adventurers — the woman and one of the men — had pulled themselves up and were loudly pleading for help.

“So you guys were just playing dead, huh? Well, glad to see you’re still nice and energetic. But to stoop to this? You sure you’re really Rank A?” Black Robe shook his head, looking slightly amused. “You’re asking the wrong people for help, though. There’s no one here who’ll —”

“YAAAAAAHHHH!”

Touya charged forward, letting out a determined battle cry that cut off Black Robe’s words. Although his speed was inferior to Setsuna’s, he still managed to close the distance in a split second.

He was only a few steps away from Black Robe when a shadow suddenly loomed before him.

Clang!

“Dammit!”

Standing in his way was the black knight, who had crossed the room just as quickly. Holy sword clashed against demonic blade, and sparks flew where the two swords crossed as both sides pressed each other in a contest of strength. But whereas Touya was using both hands to wield his sword, the knight needed only one to match him in strength.

“Whoa, hold on a second. What do you think you’re doing, attacking someone out of the blue like that?”

“Shut up! Let those people go!”

“You confuse me more and more,” Black Robe said. “What, are we not allowed to engage in self-defense?” Neither he nor the women beside him looked bothered in the least as Touya fought the knight.

Shit! The strength of this guy is off the charts! He’s even wearing a full suit of armor and yet he’s still faster than me!

Touya’s blade was gradually losing the sword lock. It wouldn’t be long before his position crumbled entirely.

“That’s why you shouldn’t dive in by yourself! Idiot!”

Touya heard the voice of his childhood friend behind him. A moment later, Setsuna had drawn her sword and unleashed a slash of her own with god-like

speed. The black knight simply threw off Touya's blade as if it were nothing, then dodged Setsuna's attack by a paper-thin margin.

"Fall back for now!"

"What are you saying?! How can I back off in the face of the enemy?!"

"Read the situation a little, you justice-obsessed simpleton!"

Setsuna grabbed the back of Touya's collar and retreated to the entrance of the room with the speed of a gust of wind. Their enemy did not give chase, and the two of them were able to successfully regroup with the others.

While congratulating them on remaining in one piece, Miyabi, in a rare show of effort, gave them some serious and detailed advice. "Welcome back. I feel strange magic from Black Knight's sword. Can't tell how much magic Black Robe has. Probably more than me. Be careful."

"Are you all right, Kanzaki-kun? You shouldn't run ahead like that! We have to work together to reach our true potential, remember?" said Nana as she cast healing magic on him. The tears in her eyes spoke volumes about how worried she had been.

Last of all came a little pep talk from Setsuna. "You hear that, Touya? If you really want to help those people, calm down first!"

"Aaahh...I'm sorry, the blood rushed to my head. Please lend me your strength, everyone. Let's defeat these bandits and save the adventurers together!"

Seeing the girls' reassuring nods, Touya found himself feeling much calmer than before. Their opponents were clearly stronger, but they were also unforgivable criminals who had been kidnapping innocent people. He and his friends, called to this world to be Heroes, simply could not overlook such an injustice.

"Are you guys finally done?" Black Robe called out from where he was still calmly seated across the room.

"That was awfully kind of you, to sit there and wait for us," growled Touya.

"Well, it's not like we're looking to antagonize the oh-so-esteemed Heroes of

Deramis. In fact, we'd rather prefer it if you just turned around and walked back out."

It was clear that Black Robe was making light of their status as Heroes, but Touya didn't mind. If their enemies weren't on guard, that meant they were underestimating Touya and his friends, which increased their chances of winning. He vigilantly kept an eye out for an opening that they could exploit.

"I'm afraid we can't do that. Although we might consider letting you go if you hand over those prisoners first."

"Ah, I'm afraid we can't do that, either. These three are *our* spoils. Such hyena-like opportunism is hardly befitting of Heroes, don't you think?"

"I guess negotiations have broken down, then."

Setsuna returned her sword to its sheath and adopted a stance so refined that even someone who knew nothing about swords would be impressed by its beauty. This was clear proof of how diligently she had kept up her daily training. Touya, Nana, and Miyabi also readied themselves for battle.

"Not too bad," murmured Black Robe as he looked at the Heroes with a sense of satisfaction. "Before we start...whatever *this* is...can I ask a question? Exactly who do you guys think we are?"

"There is no doubt. You must be the officers of the bandit gang, Black Wind," replied Touya. "You tried to make it look like the gang was dissolved a year ago, but the jig's up. The courage of those adventurers there has proven your crimes. You should stand down and turn yourselves in!"

"We heard that Black Wind members have a preference for black-colored clothing," Setsuna added. "Along with everything else, that detail fits you and those with you."

"Above all, your smile looks very evil. You look like an evil person. From every angle," commented Miyabi, as if declaring the QED of a mathematical proof.

For the briefest moment, Setsuna thought she saw a trace of shock flash across Black Robe's face in reaction to Miyabi's words. *Or did I just imagine it?*

Black Robe raised a hand to his mouth, as if attempting to cover a smile. The

suspicious gesture prompted Setsuna to keep an especially watchful eye on him.

“Is that so? Well, I guess I can see why you’d think that. Since you guys went to the trouble of coming all the way here, how about we play a game?”

“Uh...a game?”

The Heroes grew even more wary at the unexpected suggestion.

“After we finish talking, I’ll have a practice match with all four of you. None of my companions will intervene. If even one of your attacks damages me, then you win. On the other hand, if I render all of you unconscious, you lose. No killing is allowed. If anyone dies, the other team loses by default. What do you say?”

As he finished speaking, the maid next to Black Robe narrowed her eyes slightly, while the woman in military uniform reacted exaggeratedly. It looked like she was vehemently protesting, but much to their bewilderment, the Heroes could hear no words being spoken aloud.

“This game of yours sounds advantageous for us. What’s your real intention?”

“I have no hidden intentions, nor am I covering anything up. It’s just a game, plain and simple. After all, things would get pretty messy if a Hero were to die. So this works out better for all involved. My offer from earlier still stands, though. You’re always free to turn around and walk right back out if you want to.”

“Hmm...what will we be betting?”

“Betting? Let me see. How about the winning side gets to give one order to the losing side. Rather simple and straightforward, don’t you think? You can order us to let these idiots go. If you use your order just right, you could even take us prisoner.”

“What proof is there that either side will uphold their promise if they lose?”

“Well, you guys are ‘the Heroes,’ right? You’ll keep your word, I’m sure. You wouldn’t be Heroes otherwise.”

“Well...that’s true,” Touya nodded.

“As for me...let me see. How about I write up a contract? Regardless of what you think of us, we’re still adventurers. If we don’t abide by our contract, you can take it straight to the guild. I’ll include a line agreeing to be expelled if I break my word. Give me a moment.”

Black Robe took a pen and paper offered by the maid, then swiftly wrote up his offer. “Right, this should do the trick. Here you go. Feel free to look it over first.”

The paper that was meant to serve as a contract fluttered over to the Heroes on a soft wind that sprang up out of nowhere, landing gently in Touya’s outstretched hand.

“Would this contract actually be binding?” he asked Miyabi.

“This paper is a valuable magical item. It’s imbued with his magic. Likely the real thing.”

“If you say so, then it must be true. All right, we’ll accept this ‘game’ of yours!”

Hearing that declaration, the captives on the floor raised their voices in a cheer. Setsuna, however, thought she saw Black Robe grinning yet again behind his hand.



Even I had not expected things to go this well. With our appetite only whetted by the “fight” against the so-called Champions of Trycen, we proceeded to set up a little contrivance in the time that it took the Heroes to arrive. Well, I say “contrivance,” but it wasn’t anything all that fancy; we simply arranged the scene in a way that would make it easy for them to mistake *us* for the Black Wind officers.

Christoph and his buddies’ cries for help were entirely unexpected but certainly worked to give our setup even more credibility. I would be able to satiate my thirst for battle for a while, and I could use the winner’s order to have the Heroes act as witnesses in the matter of Black Wind’s arrest, which should be enough to strip them of their champion statuses and condemn them to prison.

It was the perfect “two birds with one stone” strategy. While waiting for the Heroes to arrive, I had even used the extra time to move our tableau from the boss’s room to a much bigger chamber that looked like a training facility.

::Hold on, Kelvin! Why do you get to fight all of them by yourself?! I wanted to join in too!::

Clearly, Sera had misgivings about the rule that named me the sole participant on our side. Thankfully, she had the presence of mind to keep her complaints restricted to the Network, although she was outwardly staring daggers at me.

You’ve had several occasions to let loose over the past few days already, haven’t you? I want to let loose a little myself. And if we do this four-versus-four, it wouldn’t be much of a fight.

::But I was looking forward to this so much!::

::Master, I also have qualms about you fighting by yourself. Although you are very powerful, your build is meant to work as a support role. As all four of your opponents have the class of ‘Hero,’ is it not unnecessarily risky for you to handle them all at once?::

::She’s right! Let me do it!::

Efil was uncharacteristically opposed to my decision, but I knew that her words were said out of consideration for me. Sera’s stance, on the other hand, was fueled entirely by her own appetites.

This “game” is also meant to help me test myself in the area where I am weakest: a one-against-many close-quarters fight. I’ve made all the necessary preparations. Please let me do this, Efil, Sera. I’ll make it up to both of you at a later date.

My biggest reason, however, was that I specifically wanted an all-out fight against the Heroes, with them coming at me in full force. *This will be a great chance to see what that Unique Skill does...*

::If you say so, Master, then I shall abide by your will. Um, about the ‘making it up’ that you mentioned...w-would you like to come with me to another café?::

::A café?! What's that? It sounds fun!::

All right, I guess Sera's attention has been diverted for now. Oh, hey, let's ask Efil to wear a dress again when we go out. Yes, let's do that. Wow, I feel strangely motivated by all this! I thought to myself before returning my attention to the Network.

By the way, Gerard, am I smiling right now?

::Yes, you are, my king. You have been ever since the Heroes first attacked::

Seriously? I don't even realize I'm doing it. Does my smile look that evil? It actually hurt my fragile heart a bit to hear you say that, you little Hero punks.

::It is a truly wonderful smile, Master::

::I think it's demonic and super cool!::

::Well...different people might see the same thing in a number of ways...::

'Wonderful' and 'super cool,' is it? That's not too bad. So that silver-haired Hero was employing psychological tactics on me? She's good; it nearly got to me. Guess I should respond in kind. All right, then, it's about time to get this party started. I've already given them a few minutes to make their preparations and cast their healing and buff spells, so they should be coming at me soon.

"Spirit of Light, please lend me your strength!"

"Spirit of Wind, please help us."

"Spirit of Water, please and thank you."

"Spirit of Darkness, do your moderate best."

Looking across the room, I saw four tiny balls of light, each one a different color, whirling around the Heroes.

"Interesting. Those are the blessings of the spirits, I guess."

"You know about our blessings?"

"It's my first time seeing them in person. People with blessings are quite rare. As someone without one, I'm admittedly envious of you all." *That said, I've been promised one as soon as I succeed in Summoning a certain goddess. Please return in your artificial body soon, Melfina-sensei!*

“Our preparations are done. We can start any time.”

“All right. The battle zone will be this entire room. My comrades will protect the adventurers, so don’t hesitate to throw everything you’ve got at me. As for the starting signal...let’s say as soon as this coin hits the ground.”

I grabbed a coin from my pocket — or rather from the super compact Clotho clone inside my pocket — and showed it to the Heroes.

“Gotcha.”

“To keep things fair, we’ll have the adventurers toss the coin. Not that it makes a real difference who throws it, but whatever. All right, you guys, this coin is about to decide your fates. Toss it carefully, okay?”

For what it was worth, I mouthed, “Don’t. You. Run. Away. Okay?” as an extra precaution. Christoph and Priscilla nodded furiously. Ado was still lying motionless on the floor...he had yet to recover.

“So, shall we begin?”

“Guys, we’ll do it like we planned, all right?”

“You got it.”

“Sure!”

“Roger.”

Christoph threw the coin with a quivering hand. It landed right in between me and the Heroes, clinking with a high-pitched sound that reverberated throughout the room.

“Setsuna, let’s go!”

“Behind you!”

As expected, the two who looked like front-liners — the guy and the girl with the katana — immediately rushed towards me. When fighting a mage, closing the distance and forcing a close-quarters engagement was key. This was especially true in my case, when I had no tank to protect me. For their part, it was the right call to make.

“Come out, Mun-chan!”

Something flew out of the rucksack that Nana, standing all the way in the back, was carrying.

“Is that — it’s a dragon!” I cried, surprised.

“*Rawr!*”

The creature attempted a roar, but it was sorely lacking in impact. There was no doubt about it being a dragon, but it was still very young. Judging from its red scales, it was likely a flame dragon.

“Flame Blaze!”

The little reptile sucked in enough air to make its tiny chest puff up, then spat out a stream of fire at me. However, I was already long gone from my previous position.

The silver-haired girl, also standing in the back, thrust her hands forward. “My turn...”

Just as she was about to chant a spell, I placed a hand on her head. “Hey, sorry. It looks like this is gonna be a bit more taxing than I expected, so I’ll be borrowing this from you first.”

“Huh?” The girl’s eyes widened in surprise.

While the Heroes had been making their preparations, I’d used the time to cast Sonic Acceleration on myself. This Rank A Green Magic spell doubled my Agility, bringing it close to 1,000. It was a value that easily surpassed that of the samurai girl, who was the quickest member of their party. I had broken through their formation faster than their eyes could follow.

“How is he behind us?!”

“Miyabi, run away!”

With this move, I’d achieved my first goal and could finally reveal the special ability of my new equipment. *Don’t worry, this isn’t going to hurt you.*

“Skill Eater: Devour.”

A black aura emanated from the gauntlet resting on the girl’s head. Just like Sera’s Arondight, my new gloves, collectively named Skill Eater, were Rank S

items made from Viktor's carapace. In exchange for being a bit weaker than Arondight, Skill Eater had a special ability: it could copy any skill from a person simply by touching them.

There was a limit of one active skill per gauntlet, and registering a new skill would overwrite the previous one. What made the ability so powerful was that even Unique Skills were susceptible to it.

At present, it was my right gauntlet that I was using on Miyabi.

"I'll just be grabbing Parallel Thought for a bit, thank you very much."

"Get away from Miyabi-chan!"

The other Heroes were charging at me again. Even the dragon whelp was heading my way, so it was time for me to retreat. *Might as well go back the way I came.* I wove smoothly past the two teenagers and resumed my original position.

"Damn! He did it again!"

"Looks like you were at least able to see me this time."

"Miyabi, what did he do to you?!" the samurai girl called over her shoulder, keeping her katana up and her eyes trained on me.

"Mmm, I think I feel fine."

Of course she does. All I did was copy one of her skills. But let's get back at her for the psychological tactic she used on me before...

I brought back the smile that had been on my face earlier and said, "Don't worry, I didn't do anything."

"Touya...I might not make it."

Oops. I had *not* expected her to make a face filled with that much despair.

"Miyabi?! Shit! Nana, focus on healing her! You bastard, what did you do?!"

"Ughh..." The silver-haired girl crumpled to her knees, looking thoroughly heart-stricken.

Um, but I didn't actually do anything to her. We seem to have moved well past the point of reason here.



I took the opportunity to test out Parallel Thought. While keeping my attention on the Heroes, I prepared a spell in the back of my mind. I felt myself smoothly processing both tasks at the same time, as if I had two brains working in tandem. *And this can probably handle even more synchronous tasks if I wanted it to...*

“Miyabi-chan, are you all right?! Bright Heal!”

Upon receiving Nana’s dose of White Magic, she attempted to get back up. “No problem. No external injury. But maybe it’s a slow-acting effect. Staying wary.”

“In case you guys have forgotten, we’re in the middle of a battle right now. Please take your theatrics elsewhere,” I said, throwing a Radiance Lance at each of their backs. The spears of light, which had appeared without warning, closed in on the girls at high velocity.

“I won’t let you hurt them!” yelled Touya.

“Yah!” Setsuna cried, leaping forward.

The two each intercepted a Radiance Lance with their weapons and continued moving forward to close in on me. *Guess they can handle that much. But now we’re just repeating what happened a moment ago.*

As I was about to utilize my speed to overwhelm the Heroes once again, a white ball of light suddenly floated in front of my face.

“Now!” shouted Touya.

With that one word, the glowing ball emitted an incredibly bright light directly into my eyes, temporarily blinding me. *Is this a Spirit? I guess Spirits aren’t detected by Presence Sensing, then.* The Heroes had sent the spirit over in order to rob me of my sight, and I hadn’t even noticed it was there. I had to admit it was a pretty good plan. Still, Presence Sensing was detecting the Heroes just fine, informing me of their continuing approach. In response, I raised a crude black wall that split the room in half, cutting them off from my party’s side.

“Adamantite Rampart!”

The Rank A Green Magic spell was a direct upgrade of Earth Rampart and was

tough enough to withstand several serious punches from Sera, which was saying something.

“Setsuna!”

“I know! Using Iron Cutting Authority...*NOW!*”

CRASH!

There I was, thinking about just how tough this wall was, when the sound of said wall collapsing filled the chamber.

Seriously? You sliced through that wall like it was nothing? The Unique Skill possessed by the samurai girl was the one that I had been most wary of, and now it was clear that my concerns were well founded. As the name implied, the skill seemed to give her the ability to cut through anything she wanted, regardless of the target’s level or toughness.

That being the case, parrying her attacks with my staff or gauntlets was out of the question, and I was left with little choice but to simply dodge her blows.

“Blind Cure.” I quickly healed my eyes with White Magic and took stock of the situation once I had recovered my sight.

Touya and Setsuna had passed the wall and were seconds away from reaching me. Miyabi was in the middle of chanting a spell, and Nana was giving her little dragon new instructions. The Spirits were all hovering around their respective Heroes. Thanks to Parallel Thought, I was able to analyze all of this within a fraction of a second.

“One hit on you and it’s our victory! Here we come!”

“You might want to say that *after* you get the hit on me. For now, I welcome your efforts to keep this fight entertaining.”

When the two Heroes were almost close enough to engage me in close quarters, both of them suddenly veered off in opposite directions, flanking me. Immediately afterwards, the dragon, who had been waiting on standby in mid-air, streaked through the gap they’d made and unleashed another stream of fire at me.

Okay, so their plan is to hold me in place with a pincer attack while showering

me with dragon fire and whatever magic Miyabi's cooking up back there.

I promptly unleashed Impact to smack away the dragon's flames, angling it so that the shockwave also blew the little creature all the way back to the entrance.

The next task was to deal with the fast-approaching hand-to-hand combat. *Come on, Parallel Thought, I'm counting on you here!* I stood ready, Staff of the Evil Sage Tree in my left hand and a dagger in my right.

KLANG!

I stopped Touya's first attack with the dagger and swept his blade out of the way. Although he was using a Rank S holy sword, I had forged this particular dagger myself and was further buffing it with Vortex Edge, so it could not be easily broken.

I had also picked up the Sword Mastery skill all the way up to Rank C. Of course, Touya and Setsuna had the same skill at Rank S and Rank A, respectively, so my comparative lack of experience with a blade put me at a definite disadvantage. *But that is what makes it all worthwhile!*

"Yah!"

The next attack came from Setsuna, and this I paid special attention to. In a way, she was more of a threat than Touya, even with his Rank S Sword Mastery. A skill as powerful as Iron Cutting Authority probably had its limitations, but I wasn't going to let her test it out on my own body. So I focused solely on evading her sword for the moment. Taking full advantage of my superior speed and using Parallel Thought to pay constant attention to Danger Detection, I managed to stave off the furious assaults of both Heroes. The odds were so stacked against me that a normal mage would have despaired.

I, however, was enjoying every moment of it from the bottom of my heart.



"Kelvin sure looks like he's having fun..."

"Indeed he is. Master shines the brightest at times like these."

Efil, Sera, and Gerard — the last of whom was still keeping an eye on

Christoph and company — were in full spectator mode at this point.

“Looks like my king is handling them just fine. As he should, after all the training Sera and I have given him,” Gerard observed with a chuckle.

“Kelvin claims he wants to overcome his weaknesses in combat, but I’m pretty sure he just enjoys fighting on the front lines too much. To be fair, he has the talent for it, and I had fun too, so...all’s well, I suppose.”

“Looks like all the training Master did throughout our journey to Toraj is paying off. I’ve been happy to see him eating more of my cooking than usual as well.”

“Speaking of food, Efil, did you prepare any yet? I’m hungry now; is there anything I can eat?”

“Of course! I put all my heart into preparing it, and Master said to go ahead and eat whenever we want.”

The sight of these three adventurers not showing a speck of concern for their leader as they enjoyed their little side conversation left Christoph thoroughly bewildered.

What the hell is up with these guys?! Normal people would run away the instant they heard that the Heroes were after them! And to let a single member of their party face all the Heroes alone...these guys must be insane! Wait, are they taking sandwiches out? Do they think they’re on a picnic?!

Completely indifferent to Christoph’s confusion, Sera and Gerard dug into Efil’s sandwiches with gusto.

Sera glanced up briefly. “Looks like those two in the back are finally starting to make their move. With how busy he is, you think Kelvin’s noticed yet? Oh, the meat filling is delicious!”

“There’s no cause for concern. I’m sure Master is well aware. I tried using the Armored Tiger that we’ve been keeping in Clo-chan’s Storage. The meat beneath the armor turned out to be quite soft and flavorful.”

“Indeed, you’ve outdone yourself yet again, lass!”

They genuinely don’t care about what’s going on here at all, do they?



In sharp contrast to the peaceful atmosphere on the spectators' side, Kelvin and the Heroes were embroiled in a tempestuous sword dance. Thanks to his unbelievable speed, Kelvin was dodging every one of Setsuna's attacks and parrying Touya's superhuman sword strikes. He was even getting to the point where he could throw out counterattacks with his dagger any time his opponents showed an opening. A mage gradually gaining the upper hand in close-quarters combat was extremely unusual. But just as Sera had predicted, the tide of battle was about to turn.

"Frost Bind!"

"Felony Crush!"

What?! The ground's frozen over and caught my legs! And this heavy sensation — it almost feels like Air Pressure!

After treating Miyabi, Nana cast Frost Bind, a Rank C Blue Magic spell, to rob Kelvin of his maneuverability. Miyabi herself cast the Rank C Black Magic spell Felony Crush to increase the pull of gravity on him. As Felony Crush was a single target spell, Touya and Setsuna remained unaffected. The little dragon, who had been blown away earlier, now looked fully recovered as well.

"This is the end!"

"You won't be able to dodge anymore!"

With perfect timing, Touya and Setsuna dove forward in a coordinated attack —

"Cleft Detonation!"

— right into an enormous explosion.



The attacks that should have ended the match were interrupted by a sudden and violent blast.

"Damn, to think he'd just blow himself up..."

The split second before Touya was caught by Cleft Detonation, which might

have taken him out of the fight entirely, the Spirit of Light had erected a barrier with White Magic, which protected him and spared him from the worst of the explosion.

“The barrier didn’t even block all of the damage? Spirit of Light, no rush, but please heal me. Setsuna, are you all right?!”

“Yes, somehow...”

Setsuna possessed Sky Walk, an advanced skill that enabled her to walk in the air. With the speed buff from the Spirit of Wind, she had used the skill to instantly reverse her momentum and change directions. In this way, Setsuna, too, had escaped the attack.

“Are you two all right?!”

“Nana, don’t let your guard down. Wait until we’ve confirmed this guy’s state before doing any serious healing.”

“Even *he* couldn’t have evaded that blast unscathed, right? If he took even a little damage, it’s our vic—”

Clap. Clap. Clap.

Setsuna’s words were cut short by a slow clapping that rang out from the spreading cloud of dust.

“That was a pretty good combination. Even I got a bit flustered back there. The two front-liners drew my attention while you with the dragon slowed my movements and bought time for the silver-haired girl to use her Black Magic, which tends to have a longer cast time. All in all, it was a good plan.”

A gust rose up out of nowhere, clearing away the dust and revealing the speaker. What immediately caught the Heroes’ attention was the beautiful, untouched circle within the larger patch of gouged-out floor. Black Robe was casually standing within it, as if his complete lack of injury were totally natural.

“He took no damage at all?!”

“I couldn’t very well end the game with my own magic, could I? What kind of mage would I be if I didn’t have this much control over my spells?” He tapped the floor with his staff twice, then looked at each of the Heroes in turn. “If you

don't mind a bit of advice, you two in the back should have followed up your debuff spells with a few more offensive ones. If you had time to heal, you had time to cast more spells."

"Emotional scar. Another one."

The guy gave Miyabi a look, as if thinking, *This brat, is she still going on about that?* "You, with the ponytail. Couldn't you have utilized Sky Walk a bit more? You might have been holding back with the 'no killing' rule, but the skill can still give you plenty of extra options for your attacks. As for you, Mr. Hero...just when were you planning on breaking out your Dual Wield?"

"What?! So, you *do* have Analyze Eye after all! Well, this was supposed to be my trump card, but..." Touya used his sword to push himself up. "Holy Sword Will, reveal your true form."

In response, the sword began to emit a bright light. Within moments, the light had split into two, leaving Touya holding a copy of the exact same sword in his other hand. What made Holy Sword Will so valuable was its ability to take on the form desired by each of the Heroes who had wielded it throughout the ages.

"So that's your holy sword's ability?"

Touya adopted his preferred battle stance. Although this would be his first time using it in an actual battle, he felt entirely at ease. "Honestly, I never imagined that a bandit like you would be this strong. Dragging this on any longer only works to our disadvantage. We're going to have to pull out all the stops this time."





“Ugh, deciding things on your own again! All right, I’ll keep you company. As for you...” She glared at me. “We’ll make you regret trying to give us advice.”

Setsuna sheathed her sword and adopted a stance that even I recognized. *Iai quick-draw and dual wielding? These guys sure know how to tickle a man’s fancy.*

“I’m done healing Mun-chan!” called the girl in the back.

“*Rawr, rawr!*”

The whelp flapped its wings with determination, brazenly flying in circles over my head. Gone was any trace of innocence from its eyes, replaced with the glint of a predator stalking its prey.

“My preparation is done too! Frozen Temple!”

The entire area was suddenly coated with ice, and pillars of it shot up from the ground. The pillars, which numbered ten in total, emitted a blue fog that quickly took on the shape of a majestic temple.

“Prepare yourself, Mister Black Robe. This is Frozen Temple, a Rank A Blue Magic spell and one of the most powerful ones that I know. As long as you’re within its range, your entire body will be unable to move, as if you’ve been frozen solid. On top of that, you won’t be able to activate any of your own buff spells to counter it. I recommend that you surrender now while you still can.”

“Well, thank you for the thoughtful explanation.”

I tried to move my body but, sure enough, found that I couldn’t. I didn’t actually feel cold, and it seemed like I *should* have been able to move given enough time, but this was no state to do battle in. The prevention of buffs was also troublesome. For the moment, Sonic Acceleration was still in effect, but even that was bound to run out soon.

“Our ancient foe, soon to be dispatched.”

“What the hell do you mean by ‘ancient’? It’s my first time meeting all of you.”

The strange girl in the back seemed to be thinking it over for a moment.
“Lines make the atmosphere. More importantly, here goes my real specialty.
Grave Death Ogre!”

Miyabi’s shadow writhed and expanded to take on the form of an ogre that kneeled down before her. She patted it once, then lightly mounted its shoulder.

“This is the corpse of a Rank A monster named Red-Eyed Ogre, which I revived with Black Magic. Of course, it still retains its Rank A strength. With its power and my magic, we are unstoppable.”

Miyabi really seemed to want to show off to someone. I could almost make out the smugness on her face.

“Oh, Hero, please use this!”

An object was thrown towards Miyabi from the sidelines. The person who had tossed it was Priscilla, who had been watching quietly up until then. Miyabi’s ogre caught the item the bandit had thrown.

“This is a magical jewel. And a diamond, the highest rank. You want me to use it?”

“Yes! I’ve kept it hidden this whole time; it’s my last one! Please use it!” Her tone seemed to be saying, *If you guys don’t win, we’re dead meat!*

Miyabi shot a quick glance at me.

“I don’t mind if you use it,” I shrugged. “I forbade my party members from interfering, but I didn’t say anything about those adventurers.”

“Adventurer, your feelings have touched me. I will finish him off. Never fear.”

“Um...in case you forgot, you’ll still lose if you kill me, all right?” I reminded her.

Good grief, they finally revealed their aces. These guys sure take their time kicking into gear.

“Are you perhaps in trouble?” asked Sera casually from the sidelines after finishing off another sandwich.

“Mhm, all because *you* didn’t find the magical jewel on her.”

“I let it slide on purpose, okay? *On purpose*. But, judging from your tone, it looks like I don’t have to worry anyway.”

“You know, I would appreciate you being a bit wor—”

“Gloom Lance.”

The black spear generated by Miyabi, powered up even more thanks to her newly acquired jewel, shot forward with a speed uncharacteristic of Black Magic. I quickly drove Sonic Acceleration to its limit in an effort to force my body to evade the attack.

“That wasn’t a very Hero-like thing to do, throwing such a dangerous weapon at someone who can’t move.”

“Please take your theatrics elsewhere. Or wait until you lose.”

Miyabi’s brief period of verbosity appeared to be over. *Yep, looks like they’ve gotten a bit more comfortable fighting now.*

The fact that Touya and Setsuna had been creeping up on me throughout my exchange with Miyabi had not slipped my attention, either.

“Good one, using my own words against me. Well, let’s bring this game to an end, then, shall we?”

It was Touya and Setsuna who moved first. Within the space of a breath, they closed the distance between us as I slammed the palms of my hands against the ground.

“Arise, Adamantite Guardian!”

In response to my Summoning, two black golems rose up from the ground. They were wearing full body armor and looked like larger versions of Gerard. Both of them carried greatswords as long as they were tall, and their massive builds were awe-inspiring.

These guardians made from Green Magic — the only element that had golem creation spells — were each as powerful as a Rank A monster.

“Keep them at bay for thirty seconds,” I instructed.

The two black golems nodded, each turning to face a Hero.

I have to address this mobility problem before anything else. This is off the cuff, but let's give it a go. I focused my thoughts on the Frozen Temple spell that Nana had cast to obstruct my movements. *Concentrate on each and every fingertip...distinguish each and every target...*

While I was occupied with this task, the Heroes and golems clashed. Touya blocked the greatsword of the golem in front with his own two swords and redirected the attack. With a heavy *thud*, the golem's greatsword sank deep into the ground, causing the creature to lose its balance. But the second attack came right on the heels of the first. Touya crossed his own swords together, barely managing to hold his ground in a dangerous sword lock.

"Nnng! Setsuna!"

After climbing into the air with Sky Walk, his comrade had been leaping around overhead in a wild dance. Her trajectory was unpredictable and the Spirit of Wind was helping her to move even faster. The golems had no way of stopping her.

"Using Iron Cutting Authority...*now!*"

Setsuna's scabbard shone blue and her blade flashed for only the briefest of moments. By the time she had passed by, the top halves of both golems were already falling to the ground. But she didn't stop there. Without any delay, she continued dashing towards the only target that mattered...me.

Spell construction complete!

Pushing Parallel Thought to squeeze out every last drop of processing power in my mind, I had been using the time to create a completely new spell from scratch. This was a process that normally required months, involving numerous steps, like coming up with a clear mental image and devising the formula necessary for activation. Thanks to the fearsome power of Parallel Thought, however, I had managed it in record time. A moment later...

Ping!

A sound effect went off in my head, and a Status window popped into view.

◇ You have learned a new spell!

Phew, I'm glad it worked. Calling up four or five Radiance Lances at the same time was my limit, but thanks to this new spell, I won't have to worry about that anymore. On another note, isn't this sound effect from that game? Was Melfina the one who set it up for me? Never mind, now is hardly the time to get distracted. Setsuna's close enough that I won't be able to dodge her in my current state, so let's take this baby out for a spin.

"Radiance Crossfire!"

Spears of light shot out from all ten of my outstretched fingertips. They all located their respective targets as if they had minds of their own, then flew off at high speeds, swerving left and right as needed. In comparison to the previous Rank B spell, each spear was now markedly superior in power, penetration, and homing capabilities.

Go and destroy the pillars of Frozen Temple!

The streaks of light criss-crossed each other, matching their timing to pierce the pillars of ice at exactly the same moment. In an instant, the fog that made up the blue temple dissipated. I quickly closed and opened a fist to test out my body's current state.

Great, the binding's completely undone. I can move freely again!

"H-How do you know Frozen Temple's weakness even though it's my own original magic?!" cried Nana, unable to hide her surprise.

Ten pillars made up the temple itself. If any of the pillars were broken, they would simply revert to their original forms, as if the damage suffered had been a mere illusion. There was only one way to break the spell: to destroy all ten pillars at exactly the same time. Without the support of the pillars, the temple would be unable to maintain its form, leading to the breakdown of the spell, as had just been demonstrated.

Be it magic or anything else, as long as it's within sight, I can Analyze it. While you were casually explaining the spell to me, I had already grasped all of its characteristics. Anyway, enough of that...

With the binding spell gone, I backed up a few steps with Sonic Acceleration still in effect. A wind blew through the spot where I had been standing a moment before. “Oof, that was a close one, huh?”

“Damn, missed him by a second!” cried Setsuna.

The wind I had felt passing by was none other than the samurai girl. With the support of the Spirit of Wind, she had unleashed the most powerful *iai* that she was capable of and had just barely missed me. If she’d been quicker by a few seconds, the game would have been over then and there.

“Well, I’m not done yet!” The moment Setsuna realized that her *iai* wouldn’t make it, she created a foothold in mid-air using Sky Walk, then changed direction to pursue my retreating figure. Readjusting her grip on the sword, which had returned to its scabbard, she shifted into the next *iai* in a natural, flowing movement.

Once again, she was suddenly right in front of me, ready to strike me down.

“Out of the whole party, you really do have the best sense for battle,” I noted.

Setsuna felt a heaviness from her beloved sword. She couldn’t pull it out. No matter how hard she yanked, it just wouldn’t unsheathe.

“What’s going on?!”

And of course it wouldn’t, not with me pushing down on the hilt. Setsuna had not misjudged the distance of her *iai*. However, I had completely predicted her movements and timing, and she had been overwhelmed by pure speed.

“First one down.”

I landed a fist squarely on Setsuna’s abdomen. The punch was not an amateur’s attack but that of someone well-versed in — no, someone who had truly mastered a martial art.

“Oof! W-Weren’t...you...a magic...swordsman...?”

“Hm? Who said anything about that? Don’t worry, my Strength is only about a fourth of what Sera’s is. Your life is in no danger.”

I glanced at the samurai girl as she fell to the ground head-first. Skill Eater had done its work well by copying Miyabi’s Parallel Processing. But that was just the

right gauntlet in action...what about the left one?

“Hah, look at my Combat Technique getting all the spotlight!” Sera called out in her happy singsong voice.

My left gauntlet held none other than my dear demon companion’s Rank S Combat Technique. The great thing about my new gear was that borrowing skills from party members was basically a non-issue, since I only had to ask in order to rotate different abilities in and out as needed.

From the start of my little “game,” I had been relying on Combat Technique to help me move better and handle Touya and Setsuna’s fierce onslaught.

“Being unprepared is man’s greatest enemy!”

“So I guess you’re next, young lady?”

Having already received the order to attack, the giant black ogre brandished an arm as thick as a log while Miyabi remained perched on its shoulder. Now that Frozen Temple had been dispelled, however, I once again had an overwhelming advantage in speed. Evading the ogre’s attack was child’s play.

KA-BOOM!

The creature’s assault shook the floor, causing bits of the flooring to break loose and flip over.

That’s the power of a Rank A monster for you. And Miyabi’s even wreathed its fists in a Black Magic spell that debuffs her enemies. Talk about a troublesome opponent. However...

Miyabi threw several consecutive Gloom Lances at me as I continued to dodge. Every one of her ogre’s attacks was running on enhanced strength and speed thanks to the magical jewel in her possession. Dodging blow after blow was going to be difficult.

“You know, all of this is a fraction of what Sera can do. Get a bit more training in before facing me again.”

I wreathed my own fists in magic and easily parried away the barrage of Gloom Lances. This was the White Magic version of the pugilist technique that I had learned from Sera, made possible only due to the Rank S Combat

Technique that I currently possessed via Skill Eater. My fists, enveloped in purifying magic, jabbed into the ogre's face and chest, summarily reducing it to white dust.

"Ack!"

Miyabi fell as her mount suddenly crumbled beneath her, providing me with the perfect window of opportunity.

This girl has rather low defense stats, so let's take her out with a neck chop.

Circling around behind her, I silently and swiftly unleashed a single chop to her neck. *Thump.*

Shit, that wasn't the sound I was expecting. I might have misjudged the level of strength needed. I guess this isn't a technique for an amateur to try pulling off. She's twitching, but...well, my Strength is lower than hers anyway, so she should be fine, right?

"How dare you do that to Setsuna and Miyabi!!"

"Kanzaki-kun! I'll shield you — find an opening!"

"Ah...thanks." The boy seemed to be struggling with something internally, but quickly came to terms with it. "I'll make it count!"

I had no time to reflect on my blunder as Touya and the whelp rushed me. To my surprise, I saw that Nana was riding atop the dragon. Belying its size, the creature appeared to be quite gutsy. The last two Heroes closed in, with Nana and the dragon in front and Touya close on their heels.

This girl...her Endurance is on par with Sera's? That probably means I won't be able to hurt her with my attack power.

"Please let this work! *Icicle Shield!*"

A thick shield of ice appeared before her as she charged forward. The ultimate shield also made for a splendid spearhead when all caution was thrown to the wind.

"Glory Sanctuary!" I returned.

Abruptly, the whelp stopped in mid-air, three rings now encircling it and its

determined rider.

“Nana?!” cried Touya.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Mun-chan? What are these rings?!”

“It’s a barrier capable of binding even a Rank S demon for a while. You can’t break it at your current strength level. *Hyper Impact!*”

Intense gusts of wind began to buffet Nana and the whelp from four different directions. Although the attack power of the spell was low and not likely to cause any real harm, the wind roughly shook them about. Before long, the Hero and her tiny companion began to look rather green with motion sickness.

“Ughhh...I can’t...gonna throw up...”

“*Rrr...rrrawr...*”

Within the holy barrier, both girl and dragon suddenly vomited and collapsed, making for a very surreal scene.

“That makes three. You guys aren’t as bright as I’d hoped.”

“HOW DARE YOU!!”

Leaping over the barrier, Touya lunged at me in a blind rage. He called on the deadly dual-wielding technique that had probably been taught to him by Knight Captain Cliff, the strongest man in all of Deramis. The two holy swords in his hands shone brightly in concert with their wielder’s cry.

“As for you...” I muttered, thoroughly unimpressed. “You were the biggest disappointment of all.”

When Touya finally returned to himself, he found that he was kneeling on the ground. He had failed to avenge his comrades, probably didn’t even know how he had been defeated, and had been unable to use the techniques that he had placed so much faith in. I doubted that he had ever before experienced such a feeling of complete and utter disgrace.

“You possess such strength...” he mumbled. “Why...why do you not use it to better the world?”

“What, you believe that everyone is a good person at heart?”

“There is no one who is born evil! It is only due to their surroundings and unforeseen circumstances that people turn bad! If you allow yourself to change, then you, too, will be deserving of forgiveness someday! Humans are capable of understanding each other! It’s not too late! Even now, you could use that power of yours for the sake of others —”

Touya’s words were cut short as he found the tip of a dagger at his neck.

“What you are speaking of is an idealistic fantasy. As a Hero, it’s certainly a noble and just way of thinking. But understand this: you can’t apply it to everyone. So I have two things to say to you: mind your own damn business, and leave your idealism at home!”

Those were the last words the Hero heard before his consciousness left him.

Chapter 3: Toraj, the Country of Water

Thud...thud...thud...

Touya's thoughts felt unusually sluggish. *What is that sound? It's loud but seems kind of far away.*

"Listen, listen...so, my mommy, she makes the moooost delicious stew in the world. You have to try some!"

I'm hearing a little girl's voice now. Where have I heard that voice before? I can't remember...

"Well, that sounds like something to look forward to. But, just saying, our Efil's cooking won't lose, all right?"

And now it's a man's voice. That voice...where have I...ugh, my head hurts.

"No! My mommy's is the best! But since you don't believe me, how about I try them both and compare them myself!"

What was I doing earlier, anyway? I...feel like it was something terribly important...

"Ruka, I told you not to bother the honorable adventurers, didn't I?"

What's happened to Setsuna, Nana, and Miyabi? The last thing I was doing...

"Hahaha, I don't mind at all. It's still quite a distance to Toraj. I welcome the conversation."

The owner of that voice...I was last...Setsuna and the others...!

"Hey there, man, you're finally awake."

Touya felt his consciousness slowly return to him. Opening his eyes, he saw a clear blue sky entirely devoid of clouds. Very, very slowly, he sat up, his mind still foggy. He tried to focus on the faces in front of him, one at a time. There was the little girl who had been a captive in Black Wind's hideout, the girl's mother, and —

“Touya, right? You feeling any pain anywhere?”

— the black-robed man with whom he’d been fighting until the moment he’d blacked out.

“YOU! Get away from the girl!”

“First of all, calm down. You probably shouldn’t get up yet. Rest up for a little while longer.”

The instant Touya recognized the young man, he had tried to spring up and lunge at him. In response, the stranger threw out a nonchalant gesture, and an invisible force pushed him back down. Having only just recovered, the Hero was incapable of resisting what felt like a powerful air pressure spell. To his utter frustration, he was easily pressed back down.

“Goddammit, I won’t lose to you again!”

“You know, going all out might be the right choice sometimes, but this really isn’t one of those times. Take a better look around you. Also, if you strain yourself too much, you might reopen your wounds.”

Touya was about to exert himself further in a show of defiance, but the stranger’s words prompted him to stop and take a closer look at his surroundings. The black-robed man was sitting cross-legged, and nestled in his lap was the little girl.

“YOU SICK BASTARD! YOU WOULD EVEN LAY YOUR HANDS ON A LITTLE GIRL?!”

“Of course not, you idiot! I meant take a look at what Ruka’s holding!” said the man as he pointed at the little girl’s hands. Touya thought he felt the air pressure on him increase a bit.

Jiggling in Ruka’s arms was the slime supposedly belonging to the adventurers who had saved the captives that Touya and his friends had encountered in Black Wind’s hideout — a group of victims that had included Ruka and her mother.

“That slime...it belongs to the adventurers we went to save...”

“That’s right. Its name is Clotho. And I’m that adventurer. The name’s Kelvin,” replied the man, flashing his gold guild card in response to Touya’s confusion.

“Th-That can’t be. The adventurers we went to save were the big man and the woman with the magical jewels that you —”

“It’s true!” cried the little girl. “I said it was big brother who saved us, didn’t I?! Those other two were friends of the bad bandits!”

“Ruka, don’t raise your voice, all right?” admonished the girl’s mother. “Esteemed Hero, please forgive my daughter’s lack of manners. However, what she says is the truth.”

Touya stared at them, speechless. In light of the testimonies of the rescued victims themselves, there was nothing he could say. Now that he’d had time to cool down, he realized that the man had never once identified himself as a member of Black Wind. In fact, judging from the circumstances, he was likely the one who had taken down the real Black Wind. Even the slime that had asked the Heroes to “back up its master” was happily obeying the guy’s orders. Putting those facts together, Touya arrived at the only logical conclusion.

“So *you’re* the adventurer who went ahead?!”

“Yes, as I’ve said several times already,” Kelvin answered, finally dispelling the pressure around Touya. “So can we put this little misunderstanding behind us?”

“Ah, yes, I’m terribly sorry —”

Touya’s dazed mind finally registered the heavy, rhythmic thuds that he had been hearing in the background until then. He suddenly grew aware of the gentle rolling of the floor beneath him. His mind had been so occupied by other concerns that only now did he realize they were clearly in motion.

“Where are we?”

“Do you remember the black golems you guys fought? We’re currently riding one.”

“I’m...sorry?”

Touya apprehensively took stock of his surroundings. He was in an open space the size of a room in a small apartment. The floor was black and there were safety rails surrounding the edges. Heavy footsteps could be heard at regular intervals, immediately accompanied by a feeling of the floor rolling forward.

“To be honest, I hadn’t fully thought through the transportation of the people we might be freeing. I’m so glad that golem creation magic ended up working in a pinch.”

“Jeez, big brother’s such a klutz.”

Touya could only stare blankly as Kelvin, the mother, and the girl laughed together. After watching them for a while, he suddenly started.

“Wait, Setsuna and the others! And the other rescued captives! Where are they?!”

“I put them onto another golem with my party members until we could work this out. And now that I’ve cleared things up with you, their leader, I guess you guys should meet back up. Hang on a second.”



Sera, I’ve worked things out with Touya. Can you bring the other Heroes over?

::Sure thing! I was just starting to get bored. I’ll carry them over all at once::

I turned back to the puzzled Hero. “My companion is bringing your friends over right n— ah, looks like they’re already here.”

“What?”

I looked upwards, prompting Touya to follow suit. Something was drawing closer to our unusual “carriage.”

“We’re here!”

With an explosive sound, Sera made quite an entrance, falling from the sky with Nana and Miyabi under her arms and Setsuna clinging to her back. It was easy to forget that Sera, as a demon, had wings. Thanks to her Clip of Camouflage, those wings were normally invisible, but they still retained their function. Paired with her Flight skill, she pretty much had complete freedom to fly wherever she wanted.

“Ughhh, I feel like I might throw up again...”

“That was...a new experience!”

In contrast to Nana, whose face was pale as she pressed a hand to her mouth,

Miyabi's eyes were sparkling like stars. It was like the difference between someone who loved roller coasters and someone who couldn't handle them at all.

"I was bored, so I came as quickly as I could! Let's have tea, Kelvin!"

"Looks like you brought more than just the Heroes with you."

"Efil thoughtfully prepared these snacks for us to enjoy. She really does listen to everything you say, doesn't she? I invited her to come along too, but she said she'd continue keeping a lookout instead. Don't you think she's a bit *too* serious sometimes?"

"I want to eat some too!"

"Ruka, honey, how many times do I have to tell you..."

Speaking of which, I had indeed asked Efil to keep an eye out for us with her Farsight. *I should probably do something to make it up to her when we get back to Toraj.*

"Uh, Touya, so...you heard everything?" asked Setsuna as she hopped down from Sera's back.

"Yes, I have. Turns out it was all a misunderstanding. Setsuna, Nana, Miyabi, I'm sorry for dragging you into my mess." Touya bowed his head to his friends in apology. Then he turned towards me, getting down on his knees. "Kelvin-san, I'm so sorry for taking such extreme actions based on a misunderstanding and causing you so much trouble in the process."

As Touya got into position to prostrate himself, the other Heroes behind him followed suit. I quickly moved to stop all of them, feeling totally flustered. *After all, I was the one who set things up to play out that way, based on a whim. Then again, the blind sense of justice that these Heroes possess is a little worrying, so perhaps this incident has given them some food for thought.*

"There's no point in dwelling on it. What matters more is that you guys keep your word regarding the prize we agreed on. If you do this one thing for me, I'm more than happy to let bygones be bygones."

With that, I explained the circumstances surrounding Black Wind's defeat in

full. Having been given a basic rundown by Mist-san beforehand as well, the four readily agreed to cooperate.

“If our identities as Heroes can be of help to someone, then to answer that need is our duty. However, it would not serve as our punishment. Kelvin-san, do you not have anything else that you want us to do?”

“Anything else? Uh...something I want you guys to do...” My words trailed off as I shot a quick glance at Sera and Ruka, who had apparently already started digging into the food. *Come on, you guys started without me? I mean, it's fine, but still.*

“Ruka, you have any good ideas for punishments?”

“Punishments? Mmmmm...what about *seiza*!”

“*Seiza*?”

“In Toraj, bad boys and girls are made to sit in a pose called *seiza* while they're being scolded. It's very tough!”

“Well...all right, then. You lot, sit in this *seiza* pose until we reach Toraj.”

“Umm...how long would that be, Kelvin-san?”

“Riding on this golem? About half a day.”

Touya and Nana froze in shock. Sensing their reactions, Setsuna turned to them and said worriedly, “I'm used to it, myself, but...will you two be all right?”

The last Hero, Miyabi, had apparently never even heard the term before. “Setsuna, you know this? What is *seiza*?”

Sitting on the rhythmically rolling floor of the great golem as it strode towards Toraj, the Heroes learned that their true trials had only just begun.



Soon enough, we had successfully returned the rescued captives to Toraj. Since the transport golem would have attracted undue attention strolling up to the city gates, we dismounted a distance away and covered the last leg on foot. Aside from Setsuna, all of the Heroes were completely exhausted, so I brought them back to their feet with the help of White Magic. It seemed like Miyabi had

been slightly traumatized by the *seiza* ordeal, but...well, there was no magic cure for that.

As the Adventurer's Guild had already sent word to the Queen of Toraj, I had expected us to be welcomed back with a huge festival and the whole city out in full force...but no. There *was* a representative of the royal palace at the guild, however, and we found him anxiously conversing with Mist-san when we arrived.

Upon seeing us, the representative scanned the faces of the women we had saved, then made a beeline for one in particular. Both of them burst into tears as they hugged each other fiercely. As it turns out, the two of them were engaged and it was one of those stereotypically emotional homecoming scenes.

The woman had gone missing just the other day while on her way to Parth, prompting her fiancé to issue a missing person quest to the guild. By sheer coincidence, he had ended up being the appointed representative when Mist-san contacted the queen about the sensitive Black Wind situation. Ever since, he had been stopping by the guild day in and day out, repeatedly checking for updates.

The couple wept profusely, thanking me again and again.

The other women, including Ruka and her mother, Ellie-san, were placed under the protection of the guild, which would be helping to confirm their identities in cooperation with the higher-ups of Toraj. It probably wouldn't be too long before Parth, Deramis, and Gaun caught wind of the incident and sent inquiries to Trycen. We had the Heroes' testimonies now, so there was no way that Trycen could squirm out of it.

"See you again soon, big brother!"

"Thank you so very much, esteemed adventurers and Heroes."

After parting with Ruka — who energetically waved her arms and shouted "Bye-bye!" the whole time until she disappeared from sight — my party, the Heroes, Mist-san, and I were escorted to Toraj Castle. It seemed the queen wanted to thank us in person.

I knew this was the meeting that would determine whether I could finally get

my hands on rice. According to my earlier conversation with Mist-san, this specific strain — the description of which sounded extremely similar to that of modern Japanese rice — was harvested only in Toraj. Although it was a local staple and therefore served at inns, it was not an exported product, and only permanent residents of Toraj were allowed to purchase it.

I, of course, wanted to be able to eat it every day. I doubted that I'd be able to say, "All right, gimme rice!" right up front, but I thought I might have a chance depending on how negotiations went. *Please grant me a special purchasing permit!*

Toraj Castle stood upon a small, remote island off the coast. Like the city itself, its architectural style seemed to have a slight Japanese influence. The beautiful body of water that faced the city was called the Dragon Sea, rumored to be home to the Water Dragon King. There were many related stories and legends, such as how, during a past war, a storm had sprung up to sink approaching enemy ships, or how a gigantic dragon had appeared to chase their enemies away. As a result, Toraj worshiped the Water Dragon King as their national guardian and greatly cherished the sea.

Our procession boarded a boat at the local port, which was the only way to reach the castle. Throughout our journey, Sera's eyes practically sparkled with her first experience of traveling by water.

"From up close, the water looks so clear and beautiful..."

"It really is beautiful," agreed Efil. "And it's so clear that even the fish are visible from here."

"What? Fish? Where?"

"Over there. Ah, there are some over here as well."

"I've got pretty good eyesight myself, but I can't see anything."

Efil pointed towards the spot she'd been referring to. However, like Sera, I couldn't even make out the silhouettes in the water. Then again, that was hardly surprising given Efil's Farsight skill. In the absence of any obstacles, she was capable of seeing...well, very far. *I bet if she raised the skill to Rank S, she could even see past the horizon*, I thought jokingly. Luckily, she could adjust the

distance of her sight at will, so the skill did not impair her day-to-day life.

As we drew closer to the castle, the Heroes began to chat about our destination.

“So that’s Toraj Castle. It looks a bit like a Japanese castle,” murmured Touya.

“You think so too, Kanzaki-kun? The dragon decorations on the roof look sort of like *shachihokos*, don’t they?”

Hm, I thought the same thing. I suppose we Japanese folks would have that impression.

“According to the legends, the founder of our kingdom was summoned from another world, just as you were. It could be that his hometown was the same as yours,” offered Mist-san.

“The same as ours...was he summoned by an earlier Oracle of Deramis, the same way Colette summoned us?”

“The Oracles only summon Heroes, so I believe our founder reached this world through another means. Although such individuals are rare and not much is known about other forms of transmigration, there are credible records that attest to their existence.”

Setsuna looked pensive. “That sounds like what we would call ‘being spirited away’ in our world. Who knows, maybe there are such people closer than we imagine.”

“Ahaha, Setsuna-chan, what would be the chances of that?” laughed Nana.

“You’re right, I suppose. That *would* be quite far-fetched, wouldn’t it?”

Ahaha, but there is one right here. This Setsuna seems pretty sharp. Is it just me or does she somewhat suspect me of being an otherworlder too?

I had long since revealed my origins to my own party members after being exposed by Rio. Although I’d had to drum up quite a bit of courage to come clean, all of them took the news in stride.

“Um, Master is Master. My loyalty to you will never change.”

“Well, can’t say I’m surprised. After all, my king, your strength is unnatural by

all accounts! Ah hah hah!"

"Otherworlder? Sure, why not. More importantly, is my new gear ready yet?"

That was pretty much how the whole conversation had gone. If I didn't know any better, I might have suspected them of possessing Nerves of Steel. *And about these other transmigrators, they were probably the victims of some god or goddess's whim, weren't they? The topic's pretty interesting, though. Maybe Melfina can shed some light on it when she returns.*

"Didn't meet others in Deramis. Encounter chance lower than Touya's lecher luck disappearing," chimed in Miyabi.

"I really *am* sorry about those accidents! Speaking of which, it hasn't happened at all lately."

"Now that you mention it, I haven't seen or heard of any such accounts since we reached Toraj. What, are you in a slump? I would much prefer it if you'd stay this way forever."

"Setsuna always cleaning up. Touya always causing trouble."

"It's not like I do it on purpose..."

Oho, this topic sounds interesting too. Damn, I'm totally eavesdropping on them right now. But if I'm understanding the conversation correctly, the big Hero has that disposition so common to male protagonists in romantic comedy manga, huh? Hahaha, how about you explode and die while you're at it? Wait, so that Absolute Gospel skill that he possesses...is this its effect?

The thing about Unique Skills was that they couldn't be acquired with SP, which meant I couldn't look them up to read their descriptions. Even when I knew the name of one, I had no way of confirming what it actually did.

"Normally, by this time, you'd have tripped over nothing and taken a dive into Nana's chest, forgotten the time and walked in on Miyabi bathing, or 'accidentally' harassed a random female passerby. Thankfully, I have the Danger Detection skill, which helps me to avoid all of that nonsense. But still, this must be the first time you've gone so long without doing anything inappropriate."

"Come on, Setsuna, you know I can't help it! And I always make sure to

apologize properly...”

“Hey, Hero, I’m gonna need you to sit a bit farther away from Efil and Sera,” I warned.

“You too, Kelvin-san?!”

Yep, sounds like my guess about his skill is spot on. I take back what I said during the game: he’s the most dangerous one of them all. For some unknown reason, that shady skill doesn’t seem to be in effect right now. But I will not be letting down my guard. After all, there’s no telling when more of his stereotypical protagonist bullshit might kick in.

With everyone present activating their detection skills for various reasons, our procession finally arrived at Toraj Castle.



Once inside the castle, we were escorted to a room the size of a standard Japanese banquet hall. I specifically liken it to a Japanese banquet hall because tatami mats covered the entire floor. In addition, the room had paper sliding doors and hanging scrolls for decorations. In just about every way, it looked like a room from a traditional *ryokan* inn back home.

At the far end of the chamber sat the sovereign of our host country.

“Well met, adventurers and Heroes. I am Tsubaki Fujiwara, the current queen of Toraj.”

To my surprise, the queen was a young girl. In fact, her appearance suggested that she might be even younger than the Heroes. However, the overwhelming aura of dignity and confidence that she emitted left no doubt about her status. With her floor-length, glossy black hair and resplendent kimono, she looked like a princess straight out of ancient Japan.

I’m pretty sure she’s the first person I’ve met in this world who has a family name. Not that I’m surprised, though, considering all the Japanese influences around here.

In this world, only nobility and royalty had family names. This was a custom shared by all of the countries. I had peeked at quite a number of Statuses with

Analyze Eye, but I had yet to see anyone else with a family name. Supposedly, a high-rank skill called Naming was required to grant peerage to someone who wasn't previously a noble, but that was irrelevant at the moment.

I got down on one knee and lowered my head. "We are deeply honored for this audience, Your Majesty. My name is Kelvin, and I serve as the leader of this party. As we are but lowly adventurers, the opportunity to be presented to Your Majesty is an enormous honor. Behind me are Efil, Gerard, and Sera. All of them are my trusted allies."

I did not have Clotho Summoned at the moment. According to Melfina, Toraj had once been left on the brink of collapse by another Slime Gluttonia. Although Clotho was much smaller, I figured it wouldn't hurt to err on the side of caution. It was imperative that I afforded the queen every courtesy in order to establish a good relationship with her.

Efil used her Service skill practically every day and Gerard had been a knight in the past, so I wasn't worried about either of them. The loose cannon, as I saw it, was Sera. Although I had talked with her about it beforehand, would her pride as a demon prevent her from showing respect to a human, even if said human was the ruler of a country?

::Don't worry! I was a princess, okay? I learned how to greet other royals as part of my education. And...well, I wouldn't do anything that'd cause you any trouble.::

The sudden telepathic message from Sera prompted me to shoot a look in her direction. She was down on one knee and in a proper pose of respect. In fact, she seemed to be radiating dignity and elegance to match that of the queen.

Look at you being a perfect princess. Why don't you do this normally?

::Because it's super tiring!::

Is that so.

In spite of the friendly jab, I found myself feeling thankful to her yet again. All said and done, she was often considerate of me in her own way.

Next, the Heroes made their introductions, after which the queen relaxed her expression.

“Be at ease and raise your faces. I, too, dislike standing on ceremony. Feel free to rest a bit. I have arranged enough seats for all of you, so let us enjoy a nice long talk together.”

The Heroes began to whisper excitedly amongst themselves. I didn't catch it all, but I did hear Nana saying, “Kanzaki-kun, those are floor cushions! They're so nostalgic! They're so soft!” and Touya responding with, “I know, right? I never imagined I'd have the chance to sit on a floor cushion in a tatami room here!” The group appeared to be on a strange high, possibly a lingering effect from the *seiza* ordeal while riding the golem.

“I do notice, Kelvin-dono, that you and your party seem quite well-versed in courtesies, in spite of your status as adventurers. The majority of adventurers that I've met had no concept of basic etiquette. The contrast is not lost on me.”

We've made a good first impression. Nice.

“We are unworthy of such words, Your Majesty.”

“Do not put yourself down unnecessarily,” the queen chuckled. “Judging from the collar on your maid, she is your slave, is she not? All of her mannerisms, be it her walk or gestures, indicate a deep understanding of what it takes to treat you, as her master, with respect. Having educated a slave in such excellent etiquette is a testament to your worth.”

Uh, Efil learned all of that stuff herself, though...still, this young girl sure picked up on a lot in the short time since we entered the room. She really does live up to her title.

“When it comes to Sera-dono, I feel like I am facing a noble. As for Gerard-dono, his appearance seems to indicate that he is a knight. That said, I understand that prying into an adventurer's past is frowned upon, so I will not press. What matters most is that you are the champions who have brought down Black Wind.”

“We are deeply grateful for your consideration.”

“Say no more of it. Well then, Heroes of Deramis, I heard that you were of great assistance to Kelvin-dono during his raid of Black Wind's headquarters. Your swift decisions and prompt actions upon receiving word from Mist-dono

are worthy of commendation.”

“Uh, we didn’t —”

“Indeed, the Heroes saved us from a truly precarious situation.”

“Uh, hold on a — what, Kelvin-san?!”

Just hush and take the credit, I thought with an internal sigh. If you’re serious about defeating the Demon Lord in the future, establishing connections with other countries is extremely important. Consider it also to be an apology for all the trouble I caused you.

“Splendid, splendid. Both parties have indeed served our country well. However, I am afraid I have some disappointing news.” Here, the young queen’s face adopted a troubled expression that seemed to better fit her age. “Under normal circumstances, this would be an achievement worthy of rousing the entire city in celebration. However, given how deeply Trycen is involved in this matter, we will not be able to publicly release the details any time soon. I still wish to repay all of you for saving our country’s precious citizens, though. Tell me, what do you desire?”

The queen looked at Touya and me in turn. Touya spoke first.

“We ask for nothing in return. In spite of what Kelvin-san has said, we did not contribute anything to the Black Wind subjugation. All credit and rewards should go to his party instead.”

“How do you feel about that, Kelvin-dono?”

Well, can’t say I’m surprised. I thought he might refuse the credit.

“In that case,” I ventured, “I have heard that Toraj has a grain rumored to be absolutely delicious, but it can be purchased only by the citizens of this country. May I be so forward as to ask for a purchasing permit?”

“That is all you wish for? You may have status, fame, and money if you so choose. There is much within my power to grant. Are you sure of your decision?”

“We are adventurers who enjoy our freedom. Accepting a status unbefitting of our station in life would only shackle us. Given a choice, we would much

prefer to fill our stomachs with delicious food.”

Gerard and Sera nodded in agreement while Efil simply smiled.

The queen chuckled, then burst into delighted laughter. “What curious company indeed! Here I was, expecting you to be ruled by desire as the Champions of Trycen were. I stand corrected, much to my entertainment and surprise. Kelvin-dono, do not concern yourself with a purchasing permit. You shall have rice by the sackfuls. When you run out, simply send me a letter and I shall arrange for more to be delivered to you at no cost to yourself.”

“Were you testing us, Your Majesty?”

“Not with any untoward intentions, of course. Had you chosen to accept money or status, I would have given you what you asked for without belittlement or trickery. All this means is that I have taken a liking to you.”

The queen’s laughter rang out pleasantly once more in an obvious display of good spirits.

Looks like the negotiations have gone quite well.

“Touya-dono,” the queen continued, “you are indeed the Hero they say you are. You possess a simple honesty and a straightforward personality. These are wonderful traits in moderation. When taken too far, however, they will lead you to an early death — likely in a manner that will not allow your allies to escape unscathed, either.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” replied Touya, clenching his fists.

“That said, do not be so hard on yourself. We all learn as we live. What matters most, Touya-dono, is our experiences and applying the lessons that we learn from them. Setsuna-dono, Nana-dono, and Miyabi-dono, make sure that you support him as needed.”

“I shall take your words to heart, Your Majesty.”

“Good response. Well then, although modest, I have made arrangements for a celebratory feast tonight. I pray you will all enjoy it.”

The queen clapped her small hands together once and several screens on the side of the room slid open, revealing female servants bearing a large

assortment of dishes.

Nana's eyes sparkled. "I can't believe it! They've got *sashimi* and *takikomi gohan*! And is that a pot for *nabe* also?! Amazing; it's all Japanese cuisine!"

Setsuna looked deeply impressed as well. "From what I can see, the ingredients are not quite the same, but this is undoubtedly Japanese cooking..."

"I have heard that you Heroes hail from a country called Japan, which is where our kingdom's founder, Toraji Fujiwara, originally came from. He left behind much of his unique culture in this country, so it is my hope that tonight may serve as a small reminder of your homeland. As for Kelvin-dono, feel free to take this as an opportunity to taste the rice that our country is so proud of."

"I shall gratefully take you up on that offer."

Moments later, I had taken my first bite of rice since coming to this world. The sensation was unbelievably delicious and terribly nostalgic.



After the audience at the castle, my party and I checked in at the inn where the queen had arranged rooms for us and, for the first time in quite a while, just lounged about. I read a book; Sera was sprawled out on her bed, sipping on fruit juice; and Gerard polished his beloved sword. Efil was making dinner for us in the kitchen downstairs, a tiny clone of Clotho once again sitting on her shoulder. The Heroes were in their own rooms.

"Oh, yeah. Sera and Gerard, do you guys not have family names?" Back when I had Contracted with each of them, I had checked their respective Statuses. Neither of them had family names listed.

Sera looked over. "Where did that come from?"

"The topic just struck me when we met the queen and she included 'Fujiwara' as a family name. If I remember correctly, it's only nobility and royalty who have family names here, right? Sera, you being a princess means that you were royalty; and Gerard, you being a knight means you had peerage back then, right? So why do you only have first names?"

"Ahh, that's what you mean."

“Hmm, how can I explain this? You know of the Naming skill, my king?”

“In a general sense, I guess. I only glimpsed it for a second while scrolling through the Skills tab on my Status screen. That skill is how family names are added, right?”

Naming was quite literally used for naming people and things. At a low rank, it gave the wielder the ability to name their own personal items, with the restriction that the item’s rank had to be the same as that of the skill or lower. At a higher rank, it could be used to name someone else’s items with the owner’s permission. At a high enough rank, even spells and other people’s names could be changed. The only problem was that names altered through this skill would show up in blue text on the Status screen, so all in all, it was not a skill that would see much general use.

“That is correct. When a country welcomes a new member of the nobility, an official who possesses the Naming skill at a high rank must be present during the ceremony. It is this official who bears the duty of bestowing the new family name. I am not sure of the exact details myself, but I believe it requires the skill to be at Rank A or higher.”

“Rank A? In other words, one would have to be blessed with both Talent Points and Growth Points just to get this one skill at such a high rank. Sounds like quite a burden.”

“That is why there are entire families who do whatever they can to produce Rank A Namers from one generation to the next, keeping their hold on a position of power and honor, and their place at court secure. To hear such families tell it, nurturing a successor is also one of their responsibilities.”

“We demons are a bit looser with the whole Naming thing,” Sera added. “It was mainly just weirdos who acquired a non-combat skill like Naming and went so far as to raise it to Rank A. Most demons are highly ambitious and willing to do whatever it takes to become nobility. Consequently, it wasn’t uncommon for demon races to break out into war over a single Namer. That’s why demons settled on a simple rule: if you acquire a family name through someone in possession of the Naming skill, you’re a noble! And each skill holder can only Name one person; first come, first served.”

“Is that why so many Demon Lords come from the demon race? In the first place, what’s to stop someone from mass-producing Namers?” *What are you demons, warring barbaric tribes?*

“Really? I thought you’d like that rule, Kelvin. In any case, I only learned all this through books, so the reality might be entirely different. Not to mention a lot of time has passed since my days as a princess.”

“The way we handle Naming in the human world is completely different,” Gerard offered. “Family names are bestowed only during a specific ceremony that each country hosts twice a year. Those who possess the Naming skill are forbidden from using it without express permission from their governments. Each country keeps strict records of those with family names, and it is a crime to declare oneself a noble out of the blue.”

Interesting, interesting. Hey, wait a moment. If I remember correctly, that pig of a prince who picked a fight with me back in Parth didn’t have a family name, either. Why was that?

“What about children born to noble parents? Do they not inherit the family name from birth?”

“No, they do not. All children must undergo a Naming ceremony to receive the family name. The particulars depend on the family, but the general practice is to do this when the child is ready to move out and become independent.”

Which means Little Piggy wasn’t independent yet, huh. Well, things might be different for royalty for all I know.

“I see. Thanks, I think I get the gist of it now. So, to wind the conversation back a bit, Sera and Gerard, are you two *not* nobles?”

“I’m royalty, which is different from nobility. In spite of everything that happened, my father *was* a king, after all. The thing is, he left me unconscious while enacting my escape, so even I’m not sure how or why my family name is gone.”

“Sounds to me like your father got the demon who Named you to undo it, lass. If you had kept your family name, it would have drawn a lot of unwanted attention, no? Namers can revoke any Naming they’ve performed with the

permission of a blood relative of the Named person.”

Considering all the trouble Demon Lord Gustav went to when he sealed Sera away, including setting it up so that other demons couldn't touch her chains and making sure that she had the Clip of Camouflage to disguise herself, I wouldn't be surprised to hear that he had her family name erased as well.

“Gerard has a point. Lone nobles make great targets for bad people.”

“Well, anyone who targets me will eat my fist, so I should be fine.”

That's...not quite what I meant.

“As for me,” continued Gerard, “although I originally came from a family of peasant farmers, I did indeed receive a family name when I was appointed Knight Captain, thanks to the generosity of the King of Alcahl. If I had to guess, I probably lost my family name when I returned as a Black Spirit Knight. Being transformed into a monster must have undone the Naming.”

“In other words, there are ways of losing a family name beyond it simply being revoked by the Namer.”

“I guess,” replied Sera. “In any case, I'm just plain old Sera now. And this very reliable shield is plain old Gerard. Things worked out fine, don't you think?” She gave us a peaceful smile as she turned face down on the bed and started flapping her legs. Although I was reluctant to admit it, I felt my heart skip a beat.

Knock-knock.

The reserved rap on the door indicated that it was Efil on the other side.

“Master, dinner is ready. I have learned how to properly cook rice and have memorized all of the Japanese recipes that the chef sent by the queen could teach me.”

“Well done, Efil! I'm so glad we didn't have to rely on the very limited bits and pieces of cooking knowledge in my memory. Now I can enjoy rice every day, even after returning to Parth! You. Are. The. MVP!!”

Without thinking about it, I lifted up Efil's slender body and started spinning her round and round. *What? I might have the lowest Strength stat in our party,*

but even I'm capable of this much! Even being at the lower end of my party's strength still places me higher than your average adventurer!

"M-M-Master, I'm getting dizzyyyyyy!"

"Hahaha! And what's wrong with that?! This is cause for celebration!"

"But it's embarrassinnnggggg!"

Of course, I did not stop. *I'm going to keep spinning forever!*



“Ohhh, it’s been quite a while since I last saw such a spontaneous reaction from Efil.”

“Really? That’s her being spontaneous? Well...I guess it *is* kind of different from her usual cool self.”

“She started paying attention to her mannerisms after becoming a maid. Her cute reactions right now are how she was in the beginning.”

“M-M-M-Master, STOP IT! Sit!”

“What am I, a dog?!”

Efil’s excited shrieks continued for a little while longer.

“Hey, guys, what’s going on here...uh, what are you doing, Kelvin-san?”

Touya had come to investigate the source of the noise. He was alone since, at Setsuna’s request regarding the sleeping arrangements, he had been assigned to a separate room all by himself.



As we had gone to the trouble of traveling all the way to a different country, Efil, Sera, and I were going to spend the day sightseeing in Toraj. Gerard went off on his own, saying that he would be helping the Heroes to pick out new equipment. So it was just me out and about with a beautiful lady and a cute girl by my side. It made for a rather conspicuous sight, to put it mildly, and we encountered a number of hoodlums who attempted to accost us. Each time, the merciless Sera would jump straight to using her fists, so it fell to me, as the weakest member of the group, to gently rebuff all such advances. To avoid causing any further trouble, we eventually settled on checking out some relatively vacant stores.

“Kelvin, Kelvin, buy this for me! Just look — it’s so artistic!”

As we were poking around an antique shop, Sera emerged from the back holding a suspicious-looking decoration that bore a passing resemblance to a Buddhist statue, but with a design so demonic that I could imagine some shady cult member trying to convince me it was their one true god. *Oh, right, this girl is a demon...*

“What do you plan to do with that?”

“Uh...ward off evil?”

“I can only see it *attracting* evil! Go put it back where you found it!”

“What?! But it looks so cool!”

Since we were planning on buying something in particular, we did not have too much money to burn at the moment. Also, although we did have some spare cash, me letting Sera buy whatever she wanted would not have been conducive to her education. She pestered me relentlessly but I hardened my heart.

“Master, over there...”

“Hm? What is it?”

This time, it was Efil who was talking. It didn’t sound like she had found something she wanted, though. Rather, there was a troubled expression on her face as she pointed at the front window of the store.

I’d buy anything Efil asked for on the spot, of course.

“Kelvin! Our conversation is not over yet!”

“As far as I’m concerned, it was over ages ago!” *Seriously, how about you talk about something more constructive?* “So, Efil, what are we looking at?”

While attempting to placate Sera’s indignant protests, I turned to look outside and immediately recognized the figures of Touya and his party. Possibly having gotten separated somewhere along the way, Gerard was nowhere to be seen. Instead, the teens were currently accompanied by one of the groups of hoodlums we had turned away earlier. *Looks like I was a bit too gentle before.*

“You bastard! First that other guy, and now *you’re* bringing such cuties around?! You people doing this to spite us or something?!”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about. Would you mind explaining a bit —”

“Shut up! I’ve had enough. Lemme start by fixing that pretty boy face you got there!”

“Calm down! How about we talk this out? Don’t worry, I’m sure we can come

to understand each other!”

“Touya, that attitude is only going to provoke them more —”

“Annoyance. To be eliminated without delay. Let’s do it.”

“You BRATS!”

“Someone help! A fight’s broken out!”

What the hell am I watching? Look how naturally Mr. Hero and his friends got caught up in a fight. These thugs are hardly the kinds of opponents they’d need my help with, but I didn’t think the state of Toraj’s public order was this bad. Could this be “normal” for all Heroes? Or is this happening specifically because of Touya’s disposition? Either way, this single episode is enough to show me how tough Setsuna has it every day.

“Should we not help them?” asked Efil, removing her bow from Clotho’s Storage.

“Nah, there’s no need. I can’t imagine gaining anything from dealing with such low-tier enemies, and it’s not like the Heroes can’t handle them on their own. Besides, getting involved with Touya’s business is probably more trouble than it’s — uh, where’s Sera?”

Our other companion, who had been whining noisily next to me just moments before, was no longer in the store with us. The demonic Buddhist statue that she had been so hung up on was carelessly rolling about on the floor.

“Master, outside. Over there.”

“Where?”

Efil once again pointed out the window, so I looked back over.

“Stop right there! Why would you bully the weak that way?! Looks like you need to be taught some manners!”

Surprised by her sudden entrance, Touya cried, “Sera-san!”

“Who the f— hold on, you’re with the black-haired dude from just before, aren’t you?! You’re out of luck having bumped into us again!”

“Please wait. ‘Weak’ refers to them,” chimed in Miyabi. Then, with a derisive

snort, she added a short, “Weaklings!”

“This silver-haired bitch!”

“How about we all just calm down! I don’t want to have to resort to violence either!” cried Touya desperately.

Seeing Sera’s entrance, Miyabi provoking the hell out of the gangsters, and Touya’s unintentional throwing of oil onto the flames, I ran out of the store in a hurry.

“What the hell do these guys think they’re doing?!”



Blue sea, blue sky, white sand. After resolving the earlier hiccup, we had all decided to head for one of Toraj’s famous beaches together. With the exception of our little shopping spree, we had been spending most of our time on nothing but quests lately, so I wanted my friends to enjoy this rare day off to their hearts’ content.

“Um, Master...what do you think?”

When I finished changing into my swimwear, I found Efil waiting alone outside, dressed in a pale one-piece swimsuit that perfectly complimented her porcelain-like skin. There was a slight blush on her cheeks, perhaps due to the embarrassment of showing more of her body than usual. Her bashful expression was like an arrow through my heart. In contrast to when I had bought her, her gaunt body had filled out in a healthy way.

“It suits you very well, Efil. So much so that I want to take you home with me right now.”

“Thank you very much! Um, but we’ve only just arrived at the beach.”

The way that Efil would reply to my jokes with such a straight answer was one of the many things I loved about her.

“Speaking of having just arrived, where’s Sera? She went to get changed with you, didn’t she?”

“Sera-san has already gone ahead to the sea. She looked extremely excited.”

“I...see...”

That Sera, she couldn't bear to wait any longer and already went off to swim? I understand being excited about visiting the beach for the first time, but she could have at least waited for everyone to get changed first...

“Efil-san, where is the meetup point?” Setsuna's voice called out.

“Chest...overwhelming difference in power...”

Setsuna, Nana, and Miyabi also emerged in their swimwear. Miyabi had her hands on her own chest and was muttering something while looking back and forth between Nana's and Efil's bodies. *Don't worry, yours are not small, they are modest. That said, comparing yours to Nana's — seeing as hers are about the same size as Efil's in spite of her young appearance — is not going to end well.*

Setsuna's body, on the other hand, was well toned thanks to her daily training. She was not too muscular, and her chest was also rather sizab— *whoa, hold on, what the hell have I been thinking this whole time?! I'm too young to be a pervy old man. Get yourself together, Kelvin!*

::With you being in the prime of your life, my king, such thoughts are hardly unusual given all the pretty girls in swimsuits before your eyes. I would be worried if you *weren't* paying attention to them.::

Gerard...stop reading my mind.

This grandpa had ended up rejoining us shortly after the incident with the hoodlums. In fact, he had shown up with such perfect timing that I half suspected he'd been watching from the sidelines and had waited to make his appearance. According to him, he had been separated from the Heroes after becoming too engrossed in looking through the various equipment displays.

At the moment, he had returned to my magic pool after his usual refusal to remove his armor. I had tried baiting him with all of the fun activities that one associates with the beach, including fishing, but he had firmly turned them all down.

Wait, could this swimsuit thing be the reason why?

::Hahaha, this may be eye candy for you, my king, but for me, it is akin to watching my grandchildren playing in the water. If I'm being honest, I'm staying here more to poke fun at you than anything else.::

All right, how about I Summon you inside the sea?

::Now, just hold on! I was joking! Only joking! I'll rust in the water!::

Oh, don't worry, your armor isn't weak enough to rust in mere seawater. You would sink though.

::Clotho, say something to your master for me!::

The slime was also resting inside my magic pool. I very much wanted to let it out to play with us, but just like during our audience with the queen, it was hard to bring such a creature out into the open in Toraj.

I'll treat you to some great food when we return to Parth, so please bear with me for now.

::See, my king, even Clotho is backing me up!::

All right, all right. I don't get what's so fun about watching me, but knock yourself out.

::Seeing youngsters enjoying themselves is a favorite pastime of elderly folk. In any case, don't worry about me. You go enjoy yourself too, my king.::

I guess if this is considered "resting" for Gerard, then why not.

"Umm, thank you for waiting for us," said Nana.

"I know it's a bit late to bring this up," Setsuna added in a slightly apologetic tone, "but are you sure about us joining you, Kelvin-san? We're not imposing, are we?"

"Oh, don't worry about it. When it comes to beach trips, the more the merrier, right?" *Plus, I get an eyef— nope, I said nothing.*

Efil seemed occupied as she examined her swimsuit. "Master, the concept of this article of clothing is amazing. To think, it's actually designed for getting wet!"

I had been surprised myself when I learned that this world had swimsuits too.

Apparently, they were specialty products made by merpeople who lived in a settlement in the Dragon Sea, located within Toraj's borders. Their methods of production were an absolute mystery, and they traded with Toraj in exchange for the kingdom's protection. I was told that if I was lucky, I might happen upon a merperson walking around the city. *Do they use magic to grow legs or something?*

"The colors seem a bit bland compared to what we had back in Japan, but these are of the same quality in every other way."

"Mystery technology."

Our unconventional first impressions aside, the Heroes bumping into my party here in Toraj was probably some stroke of fate. I thought it would be a good idea for all of us to use this time at the beach to get to know each other a bit better. However...

"Kelvin-san, how could you leave me behind?"

"Ahh, sorry about that. I just couldn't wait to see the ocean." *Touya, your Absolute Gospel warrants the utmost vigilance here.*

I had gone to the meeting point ahead of him, intending to forestall any possible incidents. As I had feared, Efil had already been waiting there all alone. If this were a romcom manga, there'd be no telling what sort of crazy trouble Touya might have caused. He was a perverted bomb that could go off at any moment. *Sorry, man, but I'm going to keep all of my detection skills on full alert for the duration of this trip.*

::My king, I don't think you need to be *that* concerned about the lad....::

If I'm doing this, I'm going all out.

Once everyone arrived and I had renewed my resolve to keep Touya in check, we headed towards the water together. When we reached the shoreline, we found a certain someone waiting for us, arms crossed and legs spread.

"Kelvin! I don't know how to swim! You'll have to teach me!"

Sera was wearing a bikini that showed off her perfect hourglass figure. Her appearance was so stimulating that it drew the eyes of every single man who

walked past and invoked a genuine look of despair on Miyabi's face. There stood the Demon Lord's daughter, her fire-red side tail blowing in the coastal wind, a look of absolute confidence on her face.

It did not slip my notice that her swimsuit was slightly wet. In other words, she must have already tried diving in and then given up.

"Sera, if you can't swim, why did you get into the water by —"

"I overestimated myself!"

"Master, I'm ashamed to admit it, but I did the same as well..."

You too, Efil? But you looking embarrassed is cute, so all is forgiven.

"Hey, Heroes, I'll be teaching these two how to swim. You four go on ahead and have some fun in the meantime."

"If you need a hand, I can also help teach —"

"No, thanks!"

"Oh, no you don't!"

My quick refusal overlapped with Setsuna's shout. It struck me that this must be the responsibility that Setsuna was always shouldering. *Such a heavy burden at such a young age...*

Once we entered the water, Sera mastered the ability to swim in less than five minutes, without all that much teaching from me, and started doing the butterfly stroke all over the place like a pro. The thought, *Don't her wings add extra resistance when she swims?* briefly flashed across my mind, but it didn't seem to be an issue.

By the time we packed up to go home, Efil had become as proficient at swimming as the average person. My concerns about Touya's Absolute Gospel skill proved to be in vain. All in all, it was a very enjoyable day off indeed.



About a week had passed since Christoph and his companions had been apprehended and charged as the primary culprits behind Black Wind's activities. According to the Heroes' original schedule, they should have been out on the

open sea bound for the Western Continent by now. However, the civil officials who would normally process the seaport's paperwork suddenly found themselves having to handle the fallout surrounding the gangsters, part of which included procuring the Heroes' testimonies for both Toraj and the guild's records.

While those officials scrambled around in a frenzy, Touya and his friends found themselves with a week or so of downtime and nothing much to do.

I couldn't very well sit by and let them waste that time twiddling their thumbs. So, after our joint day at the beach, I used the rest of the week to give them a bit of training inside a nearby dungeon.

At Rank A, Dragon Sea Cave was the most dangerous dungeon in the vicinity of Toraj, so much so that everything inside it could kill an average adventurer in a single blow.

Based on the "game" I had played with the Heroes the other day, I knew that they were certainly stronger than Christoph and his buddies — in other words, stronger than experienced Rank A adventurers. Consequently, they were going to need a dungeon like this to get anything worthwhile out of their training.

As for why I was doing the training...well, there wasn't any particular reason. I suppose it was partly because they were the group that Melfina had gone to the trouble of bringing over, and also partly because they were Japanese too (not that I'd told them about myself).

Although it had only been a few days since we first met, I was familiar enough with them now that it would prick my conscience if I heard about them dying horribly somewhere. They seemed to be serious about defeating the Demon Lord, so this was my way of giving them a little boost. Personally, I wanted to fight a Demon Lord too, but self-restraint is important sometimes.

"Damn, it's so soft and springy that I can't cut it with my sword!"

"Touya, be careful! Octogigants can emit electricity!"

"Miyabi and Nana, stay focused! Being in support roles, you should always keep an eye on the overall situation! If it looks like the front line can't retreat in time, make a path for them by freezing the water! That should help a bit!"

“Understood, Kelvin-san!”

“Touya, think of better ways to use your White Magic! Fighting doesn’t only involve charging forward with your sword and spamming spells left and right!”

“Yessir!”

In this way, I was having the four Heroes fight against actual monsters while giving them pointers along the way, and stepping in myself when things got too dicey.

The creature that they were currently facing was a Rank A monster called an Octogigant. This enormous green octopus had extremely slimy and flexible skin that was highly resistant to physical attacks, as well as antenna-like horns all over its body, each capable of releasing high voltage electrical blasts. Since nearly the entire battle zone was covered in water, that ability was especially troubling, creating a need for imaginative and flexible thinking when facing off against it.

After several rounds of fighting against similarly powerful monsters, I would allow them to get some rest. Not willing to let even that time go to waste, my party and I spent the breaks drilling fundamentals into them. Gerard took charge of the sword fighters while Efil and I handled the two mages. In the beginning, I had tried asking Sera to help out but quickly learned that she wasn’t well suited to teaching others. Apparently, her brilliance allowed her to pick up things intuitively, which in turn meant that she wasn’t good at breaking them down for others.

“This is where you brace yourself like: ugh, then boom! After that, you go *bam*! See? Easy, isn’t it?”

“Uh...I’m sorry, what?”

“As I said, watch closely, you go ugh! Boom! Bam! The rhythm is important.”

“Kelvin-san, can you help interpret?”

“Sorry, I don’t really get what she’s saying, either.”

Even when Sera tried to explain things in more detail, her sentences were so riddled with onomatopoeia that nobody could make heads or tails of what she

was trying to tell them. My original hope was that, as a fellow user of Black Magic, Sera would make a good instructor for Miyabi, but some things just don't work out the way you expect.

After I released her from teaching duty, my hyper companion dove into the depths of the dungeon with a Clotho clone that was specialized for battle, simply to "kill some time." Every once in a while, a fanfare rang out inside my head, which I took to mean they were making good progress. For what it was worth, I did tell her to come back once she found the dungeon boss.

The rest of us were heading for the depths of the dungeon as well, albeit at a much slower pace. In the meantime, the Heroes continued gathering level-ups and experience as they completed match after match with the monsters along the way.

Fortunately, all four Heroes were well blessed in the stats department. My main goal was to help them get used to actual combat. Up until now, they had likely been able to get by thanks to their high stats, powerful skills, and the protection of the Holy Order of Knights. In order to reach even greater heights, however, they were going to need to step out of their comfort zones and explore their own paths. Helping them to shore up their fundamentals would enable them to do just that. Whether or not they could reach the next step of their growth as Heroes afterwards would be entirely up to them.

Something else that could potentially give them a leg up was knowledge of other skills that were out there. Even I didn't understand it all, but for what it was worth, I told them about the doubling skills. I wasn't sure how cost effective it would be for them to pick up those particular abilities given their rather expensive costs and the fact that all four Heroes were already nearing Level 60. But I shared the information with them just in case, and drove home the fact that this should be treated as the most classified of all secrets and that under no circumstance should they share it with anyone else. Still, I was slightly worried. *If anything happens, let's make them sit in the seiza pose again.*

As an aside, Sera, Gerard, and Clotho had been unable to acquire the doubling skills — those options simply didn't show up on the Skills Tab of their respective Status screens. The reason for this was unclear. Seeing as Efil had been able to pick up those same skills at Level 1 without a problem, we theorized that there

could be race restrictions on certain abilities.

After probing our surroundings with Presence Sensing and confirming that there was no danger nearby, I announced, “All right, you guys, time for a break.”

“Hnngg, I’m so tired...”

“We are moving pretty fast,” agreed Touya. “The last time I was this exhausted was when we did that special training regimen in Deramis, I think?”

“That’s just because you guys slack off on training all the time.”

“My stomach...growling...”

“Oh, you’re right, it’s already noon. I do tend to forget the time when inside a dungeon. Efil, can you start preparing lunch?”

“Yes, Master.”

“I’ll go take first watch, my king.”

“Thanks. I’ll switch with you a bit later.”

Efil retrieved a picnic basket and a large sheet from Clotho’s Storage. After carefully laying the sheet on the ground, she deftly set up the meal in a matter of seconds.

“I’ve prepared the rice that Tsubaki-sama sent us in an easily packable style. It is a traditional dish called ‘*onigiri*.’ All of these contain the standard fillings used in Toraj.”



When Efil opened the basket, cheers went up from the Heroes.

“It really is *onigiri*!”

“It was so nice getting to have rice at Toraj Castle, but seeing it in the shape of *onigiri* is really taking me back...”

“I think I might be crying.”

“The side dishes also look like picnic lunch boxes. This reminds me of lunch break at school again.”

I was also quite surprised. It seemed that Efil had learned a lot more than just Japanese cuisine back in Toraj. *Good job indeed!* I patted her head more than I usually did. As for the Heroes, though...

“Don’t forget that we’re still inside a dungeon. What if all that cheering just now had attracted monsters? Never let your guard down.”

“Oh, that’s right...we’ll be careful.”

“Memoed in my heart.”

Well, there were a lot of things that they still needed to learn aside from combat. This time, however, I had secretly erected a Silent Whisper barrier beforehand, just in case.

“All right, then, let’s dig in.”

“Thank you for the food!” the four of them said in unison.

“Mhm, I hope you all enjoy it.”

I took a bite of the *onigiri* in my hand. *This...is...!* Inside my mouth, the rice that had been pressed together all fell apart, opening up the way for a refreshing sour taste that rushed out from the filling in the middle. The flavors were in perfect harmony, attaining godly heights that exceeded even that of the most impeccably prepared rice dish in Japan. Never had I imagined that there would be dried plums in this world! The founder of Toraj sure knew what he was doing.

What also surprised me was how, despite having learned this recipe only yesterday, Efil had already mastered the pressing of rice with a proficiency

normally exhibited by veteran sushi chefs with decades of experience. *Wait, that's strange, I can't see well with all this water in my eyes...*

“Ahem, uh, Efil, it looks like you’ve gotten even more skilled than before. This is so delicious that it’s making me tear up.”

“My Cooking skill has finally reached Rank S. I put a lot of love into making this!”

Seriously? So this is how food made with Rank S Cooking tastes! Haha, I'm so touched that my body is shaking...wait, I really am feeling warmer!

“Hang on, I just got some sort of buff. Is this from your food, Efil?”

When I checked my Status, I found “Rank S Cooking/Magic Increase (Large)” in the Passive Effects area. When I trained Analyze Eye on it, a timer on the effect also popped up, currently counting down from 23 hours 59 minutes. *Damn, this buff lasts an entire day?! As a test, I took one more bite.*

“Mmm...so good...”

Okay, but do my eyes really have to gush with tears every time I take a bite of Rank S cooking? In any case, it doesn't look like I received any other buffs. Maybe buffs from cooking can't be stacked.

“Efil-san, thank you. Thank you!”

“I will never forget the taste of this *onigiri*.”

“I can't stop crying...”

“Goddess Efil.”

“Uh, um...I'm glad everyone seems to be enjoying it?”

The four Heroes were also crying rivers of tears as they expressed their heartfelt thanks. *You guys, it's fine to feel grateful, but how about expressing it in a way that doesn't freak Efil out?*

Amidst the chaos, Sera returned with Clotho bouncing about on her shoulder.

“You guys started eating ahead of — whoa, what on earth is happening here?”

“Don't worry about it. How were things on your end?”

“There was a monster room on the way, so we wiped out everything inside. Sadly, it wasn’t an infinite spawning room. I was just getting warmed up when I ran out of things to kill.”

“Monster room” was a term that showed up frequently in dungeon crawler games in reference to a special chamber where monsters would spawn in huge numbers. As a result, the monster type specific to that dungeon would appear to be “infinitely spawning.” Combined with the fact that they would proactively attack the people unfortunate enough to stumble across the room, it wasn’t hard to understand why this feature was considered *the* most deadly trap any adventurer should keep an eye out for. Or at least that was the general opinion. Sera, of course, had casually cleared one such room in a Rank A dungeon with only a tiny slime for backup. *Little wonder I’ve been hearing the level-up fanfare going off again and again.*

“Oh, and I also found the bo— what is this?! It’s delicious!”

The rather important-sounding information she’d been about to share was left unspoken in the face of Efil’s *onigiri*.



“Phew, I’m stuffed,” sighed Sera, rubbing her belly in satisfaction after having her fill of the food. “Sooo, what were we talking about again?”

“I believe you were in the middle of telling us that you found the dungeon boss?” *It’s already completely slipped her mind, hasn’t it.*

“Right, right. I found a monster that kinda looked the part,” she answered, proudly puffing up her very prominent chest.

Come on, you just made Miyabi cough up blood with that move, the poor girl.

“What did it look like?”

“It was a water dragon. I’ve seen one in a book before.”

Hmm...so we’ve finally encountered a dragon, one of the top three most powerful species in this world alongside demons and angels. I think even the Heroes can currently handle a low-tier dragon, but if it’s the boss of this dungeon, we’re most definitely looking at a Rank S opponent. It’s still a bit early

for them to take that on.

“Colette mentioned that monsters all over are becoming more vicious and powerful than usual due to the Demon Lord’s impending resurrection,” said Touya. “That probably goes for this dungeon boss as well.”

“Colette? Is that the Oracle of Deramis?”

“Yep, she’s the one who brought us to this world. When we first arrived, we couldn’t make heads or tails of anything.”

“Right, right, we were just chatting as usual in our classroom after school when a magic circle suddenly appeared on the ground beneath us. Everything went black, we met a goddess in a dream, and when we woke up, we found ourselves in the middle of the Great Cathedral of Deramis.”

What a clichéd way to get called over. Not that my road was any less clichéd, to be fair.

“So, how much do you guys actually know about the dungeons in this world?”

This time, it was Miyabi who spoke up first. As if reciting by rote, she said, “Dungeons are places with high magic density, dangerous regions, or abandoned buildings where monsters have taken to wandering about. Although they are called ‘dungeons,’ they vary greatly in form, some examples of which include labyrinths, caves, and forests. While dangerous, they also contain valuable items and precious treasures that make them very attractive to adventurers. Within the deepest part of each dungeon is a boss monster. Bosses are frequently the target of subjugation quests issued by the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“All correct. Sounds like you’ve read up on this.” *She’s a bit of a strange girl, but she seems to have a sharp mind.*

“Back when we were in Deramis, we dove into a few dungeons and took out the bosses inside,” added Touya. “They were mostly Rank C and lower, though.”

“So you guys do have experience with fighting boss monsters. All right, next question. Why do you think the guild issues subjugation quests for them?” I asked.

“Um, because the bosses are strong and therefore a greater threat to the adventurers who enter the dungeon,” offered Nana.

“And,” added Setsuna, “the spawn rate of monsters in a dungeon becomes higher when the boss monster is present, leading to more of them escaping. In effect, this makes the surrounding area more dangerous than it would otherwise be.”

Touya snapped his fingers. “After the boss is defeated, the other monsters in the dungeon become less ferocious for a while, right? Though I’ve also heard that the bosses revive again after a set period of time.”

“Full marks to each of you. The guild frequently issues subjugation quests for boss monsters for all of those reasons. Under normal circumstances, it would take a dungeon boss anywhere from one year to several decades to revive, but as of late, that time frame has been growing shorter and shorter, and the bosses themselves are getting stronger, some to the point where their strength is exceeding the rank of the dungeon they are in.

“The monsters in the vicinity of Parth — where I’m based — are by and large weaker than those found throughout other parts of the continent, but recently, even we had a Rank A monster on our hands. A lot of people are raising a fuss, claiming this to be a portent of the Demon Lord’s resurrection.”

In fact, it had sort of become my responsibility to take care of all the monsters that were Rank B and higher in the area around Parth. *Fortunately, their numbers haven’t been all that high, but Rio is definitely a bit of a slave driver.*

“Final question. This dungeon that we’re clearing right now, the Dragon Sea Cave, is a Rank A dungeon. That makes the boss...?”

“A Rank S monster,” finished the Heroes meekly.

“We’re almost out of time before you depart for the Western Continent, so we’ll be making this the final leg of your training. Sera, lead the way.”

“Sure thing. Right this way!”

Our procession followed along behind Sera, ducking into secret passageways and passing by destroyed traps. Thanks to her already having cleared the monsters along that route, we didn’t encounter any on our way.

“Whoa, look at this. Is this the room you mentioned?”

We could see a large cave surrounded by water. The closer to the wall, the deeper the water. In all likelihood, it was from the murky depths that the monsters continuously emerged. Close to where the water met the land, there were mounds of carcasses, with a few floating lifelessly on the still surface, staining it with blood.

In order to drive home the point that a room like this was extremely dangerous, I had telepathically ordered Clotho not to Absorb the bodies just yet. The plan was for my slime to do the Absorbing through a clone after we passed the chamber again on our way back out.

“This is unbelievable! Several Octogigants are already enough of a threat to us. How many monsters *are* there in here?!” Touya exclaimed.

“The corpses are all torn apart, so it’s hard to tell, but, several dozen — no, several hundred?” murmured Setsuna.

“Clotho and I split up the work, so I don’t know the exact number,” Sera said dismissively. “I stopped counting halfway through.”

Several Octogigant corpses lay scattered throughout the piles of bodies. This was a feat only possible thanks to Sera and Clotho’s abnormally high power levels. If it had been the Heroes who had come across this room, they would have been done for. The ability to spawn overwhelming numbers was a fearsome power in and of itself.

“If you guys ever have to take on a monster room, do not charge straight in like an idiot. Whenever your usual fighting style clearly can’t cut it, use your heads instead. Rearrange the situation to your advantage in any way you can. If you don’t want to let your friends die, that is.”

“Did you just indirectly call me an idiot?” Sera demanded.

“I did not, so please put down your fist.” *I appreciate your ability to lighten up serious situations, but now is not the time. So...uh...can you lower your fist now? Please?*



“Master, I see it. It’s sleeping at the bottom of the lake.”

“I see it too.”

“So do I, my king.”

“It’s just uselessly bulky, if you ask me.”

We were inside the boss room, staring at an enormous subterranean lake. Pale blue light shone through cracks in the rock wall, giving the place a mystical atmosphere. A huge silhouette lay at the bottom of the dark depths. There was no mistaking it; it was indeed a water dragon.

“Stay behind the rocks and don’t stick your faces out too far. Even though it seems to be asleep, there’s no telling what might set it off.”

The four Heroes gawked wordlessly at the dragon’s massive form.

“So, as we discussed earlier, dungeon bosses are generally a bad thing for nearby settlements. In this case, leaving the water dragon alone for too long would be dangerous for Toraj. As the Heroes, what should you do?”

This was my last test for them. *So, guys, how will you handle this one?*

“Well, we can’t beat it with our current strength. We should run away.”

“You sure? Even if doing so means potentially leaving the people of Toraj to an untimely demise?”

“I can’t let Setsuna, Nana, and Miyabi die. Yes, I’m a Hero, but before that, I’m their friend. Even if people condemn my choice, I wouldn’t ever engage in such a reckless fight again. We should get stronger, come up with a plan, and make every possible preparation before coming back.”

Touya’s words drew nods from all three of his companions.

“Nice job. You pass. Make sure you never ever forget that attitude.”



“I promise I will never forget,” Touya swore solemnly, looking straight into Kelvin’s eyes. This vow was proof of his separation from the person he had been before — an enthusiastic young Hero drunk on an unflappable sense of justice, rashly charging into every situation without a second thought.

Touya found Kelvin to be a rather enigmatic person. Although he had nearly been subjected to false charges based on Touya's own misunderstanding, the adventurer had turned around right afterwards and chosen to coach them. He was so strong that the four Heroes together had been unable to take him down. All of his allies, in spite of their individual quirks, were also incredibly nice and in possession of equally unfathomable levels of strength.

"Glad to hear it. Well then, this is where our job begins."

"What job?" asked Nana, echoing Touya's thoughts.

"Come on, guys, we're adventurers too. What else are we going to do after trekking all the way to a boss room? Tsubaki-sama came to us last night."

"Uh, you mean..."

"That's right. Time to have some fun!" shouted Sera, diving straight into the lake without a shred of hesitation.

"Look at her go. What I would give to be young again..."

"Gerard-san, please leave the melancholic nostalgia for when we get back home. Master, I'll be providing support fire as planned."

"Sounds good. Gerard, off you go. Shoo, shoo."

"Good grief, is that any way to treat an elder?"

But even while muttering his complaints, the knight descended from the ledge. *I thought that Efil-san was just around to take care of Kelvin-san, but she can fight too?!*

"Master, I'm off."

"Go ahead. We'll wait for you to deliver the first blow."

An instant later, Efil disappeared. Touya hadn't looked away. In fact, he had been keeping a close eye on her as well as the other members of Kelvin's party. Yet he had lost sight of her distinctive maid outfit in the blink of an eye. He couldn't even sense her presence any longer.

"She disappeared!" exclaimed Nana. "Can you tell where she is with your Presence Sensing, Setsuna-chan?"

“Covert Action?”

“It’s no good, I’m getting nothing. She’s completely erased her presence. If it’s Covert Action, her skill level must be super high to be capable of pulling this off even while we were watching!”

Even Setsuna can’t detect her?! “Kelvin-san, where is Efil-s—”

Touya’s question was interrupted by an explosion so deafening that it sounded like a pile of dynamite going off. Peering over the edge, Touya saw that the lake itself was on fire.

“Looks like that’s where she fired from.”

“Whaaaaat?!”

Touya looked towards where Kelvin was pointing and, sure enough, there was Efil’s figure, perched on another ledge close to the rock wall, quite a distance away, with a new arrow already nocked and ready.

“What?! How did she do all that damage with a bow?!”

“She has her ways. In any case, it looks like it did the job. The monster’s awake now.”

A roar emanated from deep within the lake. Pure, unadulterated fear welled up in the very core of Touya’s body. He couldn’t stop trembling.

“Ahaha, and it’s kind of ticked off, too. Maybe that was a little too much noise and pain for a wake-up tap.”

In contrast to how Touya felt, Kelvin-san didn’t seem the slightest bit fazed. He even had the composure to crack a joke.

“How are you saying that so calmly?! It’s a Rank S monster!!”

“Calm down, man. Look, it’s rearing its head.”

The black shape grew larger and larger. In no time at all, the creature that had been lurking below burst up in a giant spray of water.

“ROOOOOAAAAHHHHH!!”

The massive amethyst-colored bulk rose into the air, flapping its wings and unleashing such a thunderous cry that the ground shook and ripples spread

across the surface of the lake. The dragon panned its head around as it hovered above them.

“My ears,” Nana whimpered. “It’s so loud!”

“I...can’t move,” groaned Touya, his body automatically curling up in fear. “That roar didn’t carry a debuff or anything, right?!”

“Who dares disturb my sleep?!”

“Well, that’s surprising,” said Kelvin with interest. “You have enough intelligence to speak despite being an evil dragon, huh? Did you happen to previously be an ancient dragon?”

Although it was a bit hard to understand, the beast was indeed speaking human words. Touya recalled that during their lessons with Colette, there had been a whole section dedicated to the dragon race. *If I remember correctly, evil dragons are those who have succumbed to their desires for power or greed. They have better stats than normal dragons, but the trade-off is a marked degeneration of their intelligence. Since this one can still hold a conversation, it must have been a rather high-tiered dragon in the past, just as Kelvin-san asked.*

“Hmph, looks like a few ants have wandered into my home. Do you puny beings think you can win by attacking in a group?”

“We don’t want to hear that from someone who can’t even gauge his opponents’ strength, you big lizard,” smirked Sera from a position slightly higher than the dragon’s eyes. She even followed up her comment with a provocative laugh.

“Whoa, Sera-san’s really amping up the tension...”

“Uh...Touya, are my eyes playing tricks on me, or is Sera-san also floating in the air like the dragon is? She’s not using Sky Walk the way I do, either.”

Just as Setsuna said, Sera was adopting her usual haughty stance, but this time in mid-air. Touya couldn’t tell what sort of skill she was using to do it, but he had a feeling she was capable of a lot more amazing things that he and his friends weren’t yet aware of.

“Howl all you like, little humans! I am a dragon who has attained unlimited

power! The difference in strength between us is —”

“Hey, sorry to interrupt your very impressive speech, but your tail’s already ours.”

“Wait, seriously, Kelvin-san?!”

Before Touya knew it, Kelvin, who had been right beside him just a moment before, had crossed over to stand behind Sera. The same moment that he noticed that fact, another roar — this time a scream of pain — filled the air.

“ROOOOAAAHHH?!”

“You have far too many openings, you know that?” commented Gerard as his sword sliced through the dragon’s tail at its root. With a splash, the powerful muscle tumbled into the lake.

“YOU ANT! THAT IS UNFORGIVABLE!”

The dragon breath unleashed by the beast was like a waterjet. A stream of high-pressured fluid that could bisect anything without mercy suddenly closed in on Kelvin and his party members.

However, the three of them managed to dodge the torrent with such coordinated movements that it almost seemed like they were reading each other’s minds. The second they had drawn far enough back, Efil fired. Crimson flames swirled around the red bow she was holding and had been gathering around the nocked arrow. Upon its release, the arrow rocketed forward as if propelled by the engine of a fighter jet.

“So that’s the sound I heard before,” Touya murmured.

Every arrow that Efil shot exploded with a deafening boom. What she was holding was no longer a bow, but a cannon. The sound generated by each arrow’s release and the resulting explosion upon contact with the water dragon were equally terrifying. In addition, despite practically spamming such incredible magic — *it has to be magic, right?* — she was showing no signs of MP fatigue at all. *Is she really just a maid?!*



“Roaaarrr!”

The dragon turned its head towards Efil’s position on the rock wall, but she was no longer there. *Has she gone into hiding again to change her vantage point?*

“Don’t look away during a fight!” shouted Sera as she delivered a follow-up blow to the back of the monster’s head. The impact of her strike caused the hulking form to crash back down into the lake at an incredible speed.

To be honest, from that point on, the encounter couldn’t even be called a fight anymore. Every time the creature attempted a spell, Kelvin would offset it with one of his own. When it tried to use brute force, it would lose to Gerard. Every time it took another punch from Sera, it would become even weaker, and every time it exposed an opening, Efil would carpet-bomb the hell out of it.

Touya laughed weakly. “Your master really is something, isn’t he? Do you think I could ever reach his level?” he asked the slime called Clotho. For all Touya knew, even this little critter that merely jiggled itself as if to say, “Who knows?” might be unbelievably powerful as well. Kelvin truly was an enigma.



The day after the water dragon subjugation, the Heroes’ ship finally received permission to depart from Toraj. The preparations for the journey had been completed several days in advance, so the four teens were making their way straight to the port. My party and I also headed over to see them off.

“Esteemed Heroes! The ship is ready to leave at any time!” shouted one of the crewmen in an energetic voice.

Touya smiled wryly in response and gave a short laugh. “Please don’t do the ‘esteemed Heroes’ thing. Our cover story is that we’re normal adventurers, remember?”

“Ah, I’m sorry! How could I forget!”

“It’s fine, just be careful next time. We’ll be boarding soon; please give us a moment.”

After the sailor withdrew, the teens turned to us.

“Kelvin-san and everyone else, thank you so much for everything you’ve done for us.”

“Don’t worry about it. I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t want to. There’s nothing to thank me for. By the way, you guys only got permission to cast off just now, right? You’re leaving so soon?”

“According to our original schedule, we should have been on that ship a few days ago. And we wouldn’t want to impose on you any longer.”

“As I said, you weren’t impos—”

From his position behind me, Gerard placed a hand on my shoulder. “This is the lad’s decision. Let’s accept it.”

“You’re as direct as ever,” I chuckled, pulling a few things out of Clotho’s Storage. I threw one to each of the Heroes, saying, “It’s my parting gift. Here you go.”

“Wha— ho— hup...Kelvin-san, what is this?” asked Touya, fumbling a few times as he caught the object.

Setsuna peered closely at hers. “It’s a pendant?”

I nodded. “Yep. Made it off the cuff. Just think of it as a lucky charm.”

What I had lobbed at each of them were pendants modeled after their respective magical affinities. The items provided a tiny stats buff plus a secret function of my own design. I didn’t expect them to ever actually need it, but it might prove useful in a pinch. The Smithing skill didn’t cover accessories, so I’d had to borrow the appropriate skill from a local ornament craftsman with Skill Eater.

“*Tsundere* archetype?”

“Really, Miyabi? Your response to getting a gift is to call me a *tsundere*?” *I try being nice for once and this is what I get? Although, I guess that’s just part of what makes her ‘her.’*

“Amazing! Mine looks like an ice crystal. Kelvin-san, thank you very much! I’ll take good care of it.”

“You continue working hard together with Mun, all right, Nana? That little

whelp of yours is probably going to Evolve into a full-grown dragon soon. So watch out; it won't be able to fit into your rucksack then."

"*Rawr!*"

"Oh, Mun-chan, don't say that!"

I couldn't understand what the tiny reptile said, but apparently it enjoyed riding in Nana's bag. *Sounds like a dog that likes sticking its head out of the car window. Don't they say it's not good to over-pamper a pet?*

Setsuna spoke up next. "I was able to have a rather easy time of it here in Toraj, very likely thanks to you, Kelvin-san. And you even helped us beat this justice-obsessed idiot into shape. I have no words to express how thankful I am."

"When times get tough, you just need to hang in there. In spite of his faults, he's still the leader of your party, right?"

Setsuna sighed. "I'll do my best..."

"Can you guys not talk about me right in front of my face?!"

In fairness, Touya had grown quite a bit, both physically and mentally, what with everything that had happened this past week. I was hopeful that Setsuna's burden had grown just a little bit lighter.

Touya clenched his fist resolutely. "No matter what happens on the Western Continent, we'll do our best!"

"All I can say is, I hope you don't end up running in the wrong direction again."

"Ahaha, it wouldn't hurt you to have a little faith in me..."

I'd already very, very strictly warned Touya and the girls to never, ever explain the effects of their Unique Skills to anyone, not even to me. People in possession of Analyze Eye at a high enough rank would be able to see the names of those skills but could only guess at their effects. Keeping that information hidden could prove to be an enormous advantage if used properly, so even I still didn't know the exact details of what Absolute Gospel and Iron Cutting Authority did. My curiosity was a small thing in exchange for their lives,

though.

“Well then, Kelvin-san, we’ll be off.”

“Oh, is it time already? Efil, now would be good.”

“Yes, Master.” She turned to the four Heroes. “Here you go. I have packed you each a lunch box with simple dishes. Please enjoy it during your trip.”

When she’d learned of their scheduled departure, Efil had quickly whipped up four lunch boxes packed with *onigiri* (leftovers from yesterday) and sandwiches for an unexpectedly modern meal.

Touya accepted the basket on the Heroes’ behalf. “Efil-san! You’re the best! Thank you so much!”

“Goddess Efil!”

“I didn’t think we would get to enjoy Efil-san’s cooking again once we left!”

“I’ll make sure to share it with Mun-chan!”

All four of them thanked Efil profusely while shaking her hand in a heartfelt manner. *Goddammit, these kids. NOW you guys are all happy and touched? I mean, I know that putting myself on a scale against Efil’s cooking is just asking for heartache, but still! I too am a captive of her incredible food...but still!*

“We’ll be setting sail soon! Those who need to board, please do so now!” announced a crewman loudly. The preparations for the ship’s departure had been completed.

“Go on, you guys don’t want to miss the boat.”

“AHHH! We need to hurry! Everyone, let’s run!”

“Wait for meeee!”

At once, the Heroes sprinted onto the ship, with Nana lagging behind slightly, but their faces soon popped back into view over the railing.

“Kelvin-san, I promise I will never forget everything that you’ve taught me!” shouted Touya.

“Let’s meet again someday!” added Nana, still panting a bit.

“We’ll grow strong enough to beat you next time! Thank you so much for everything!”

“Ditto. Next time, we win!”

The four of them continued to wave at us until their ship was out of sight. When I considered how badly I had messed with them at the start, being on the receiving end of such gratitude made me feel a bit guilty.

“Master really is a kind person.”

“Indeed, all those youngsters looked as if a burden had been lifted.”

“What nonsense are you two talking? The only thing that happened was me pulling them along on a whim. Anyway, it’s almost noon. We should go grab some lunch ourselves.”

“Master is cute when he’s feeling bashful.”

“I’m not bashful!”

And putting that aside...the Western Continent’s where they’re going? That’s where the Rizean Empire is...

Curious, I decided to send Gerard a private message.

Gerard, if — and I’m just asking for the sake of it — if we pick a fight with Rizea in our current state, would we win?

::Where did that come from?:

I was just thinking about my promise to you. We have to track down Jildora so that you can take revenge, right?

::Gah hah hah! So you remembered. And here I was, thinking that you’d forgotten.::

How could I forget something so important?!

When Gerard had agreed to become my Follower, I had promised that I would help him avenge his home country of Alcahl by taking down Jildora, the one supposedly responsible for its downfall. I had yet to make any progress towards that goal.

::Well, I’m not so sure since things might be quite different now than they

were during the era in which I was alive. Jildora himself may have moved elsewhere, for all I know. In addition, Rizea used to be the largest country in the Western Continent. Judging from how that empire and Deramis are still continuing to tussle, it probably hasn't lost all that much strength over the years. Although our party is indeed strong, taking on the empire itself would still be much too dangerous.::

I see...looks like we'll have to start with gathering some information, then.

::I'm in no particular hurry. To be completely honest, even I had thought it would be impossible when I Contracted with you.::

What? And you joined up with me anyway?

::Well, the way I saw it was, instead of remaining behind in that castle, my chances were higher by going out into the world with you. That was the only degree of hope that I harbored at the time. But then I got to travel with you, my king. And then Efil joined us, and recently, so did Sera. Now, we are powerful enough to defeat Rank S monsters.::

Gerard looked up at the sky.

::My king, I am eternally grateful to you. The dream that I had previously thought impossible seems like it could actually be within reach. When you fulfill your promise, I shall acknowledge you then as my true king and master.::

*Sounds good to me. I don't mind remaining as your pseudo-master until th—
oof.*

Sera, who had leaped onto my back, asked, "Come on, what are you two talking about all secret-like?"

Efil, too, was looking up at me as she grabbed the sleeve of my robe. "Please don't leave me out, either..."

"All right, all right, I'll tell you guys! So you can get off my back now, Sera! And Efil, stop looking so sad!"

"Gahaha! Let's grab some food first, my king!"

Gerard clanked on ahead and I hurried to catch up to him. With Sera still on my shoulders and Efil's hand in my own, I felt the comforting weight of the

bonds that I shared with my closest friends.



We were in the kitchen of Toraj Castle. When the Heroes were all exhausted from the dungeon training, if Efil and I didn't have anything else planned, we would get Tsubaki-sama's permission to drop by. One reason for this was so that Efil could learn how to cook Torajian dishes. The other reason was so that we could build up our relationship with Tsubaki-sama herself.

"Be that as it may, your cooking is truly delicious, Efil. My head cook is now the one learning from you! Kelvin, can I not convince you to allow Efil to enter my service? Wait, I have a better idea. How about all of you enter my service! You and your party have proven yourselves with the evil dragon subjugation. I can make use of that strength of yours!"

"Tsubaki-sama, I have said 'no' many times now. Efil is my precious companion. And I love my own freedom, as I mentioned at our very first meeting."

In the beginning, we had come to the castle kitchens strictly for the recipes. It was only several visits later that Tsubaki-sama began to show an interest in Efil's cooking, probably after having been presented with samples of it by some of the castle guards or the servants.

Now that Efil had raised her Cooking skill to Rank S, the quality of her meals greatly surpassed even that of the castle's head chef. Having only recently figured out how to make the most of her newfound ability, everything that she cooked was delicious enough to trigger a burst of tears with every bite. After hearing about this incredible cuisine and having tried some for herself, Tsubaki-sama started coming to the kitchen regularly to solicit Efil again and again. Clearly, the Japanese passion for food was another cultural tradition that had been passed down in Toraj over the years.

As a result, Efil herself was currently in a sort of teaching position at the kitchen. The time that she had once put aside to come and learn was now spent on *her* giving the cooks instructions and pointers instead.

Normally, there would be at least a voice or two of dissent in such a situation, but from what I'd heard, Efil's lovely appearance, her kind, careful teaching

style, and her overwhelmingly incredible cooking abilities had completely conquered the kitchen staff's hearts. There were even some among them who would blush when they looked at her. She was basically their idol at this point.

"Mm, so it did not work. I know that what I am asking is a bit of a stretch, but still, what a shame..."

"Please don't make that face, Tsubaki-sama," said Efil. "As long as we are in Toraj, I will make sure to come here every day."

"Do you speak truly?! I will consider that a promise!"

"Yes, it is a promise."

Although Tsubaki-sama had exuded an extraordinarily formal aura during our initial audience with her, we had ended up on pretty friendly terms after speaking to her on several more occasions. She knew how to differentiate between official duties and private settings. When not in "work mode," so to speak, she acted like a regular girl of her age.

At this point, she almost felt like an old friend to us. One time, she had even told us, "I give you permission to address me without honorifics. There's no need to stand on ceremony with me!" But we had obviously chosen to refrain. No matter how close we had grown, there were eyes and ears everywhere. Perhaps she was testing us again; we'd probably never know. However, we believed it important to always show at least the bare minimum of respect merited by our differences in status. Even without dropping the honorifics, we had become informal enough with her already.

"Kind of sorry to mention this after the promise and all, but we were actually thinking that it's about time for us to leave Toraj."

"That's quite sudden. First the Heroes and now all of you as well?"

"We can't stay away from Parth for too long. Not with so many dangerous monsters appearing in the region lately."

Although Rio had been raising the alert level, there wasn't much that could be done about the fact that the strongest adventurers in Parth — aside from my party — were only Rank C. Yes, he had assured us that it would be fine to go on this trip, but Ange, Clare-san, Uld-san, and a lot of other people that I was

familiar with were still in the city. If I didn't get back soon, I would be the one who was starting to feel worried. Especially considering there had been no word from Melfina yet, either.

"As its byname of 'The City of Peace' signifies, Parth is the symbol of peace between our four nations. There is surely no more reliable guardian than you and your party, Kelvin. Even so...I cannot help but feel it is a bit of a shame."

"Thank you for your words, Tsubaki-sama. Although we can't promise much, we'll certainly strive to heed your will."

"I'm glad to hear it. If you ever change your mind, simply knock on the gates of Toraj Castle."

Although I had no intention of taking her up on her offer at the moment, having built up such a close relationship with someone who stood at the helm of an entire country was a huge boon. Because of her standing, Tsubaki-sama did not have a lot of opportunities to speak with those her own age. I had every intention of maintaining our friendship going forward.

"Tsubaki-sama, we have just finished making a sample of a new kind of pastry. May we have the honor of hearing your opinion?"

"You just made a new pastry, Efil?! I will eat it! I will eat it immediately, and none will stop me!"

"Tsubaki-sama, you *are* still before your subjects, you know..."

This queen was perhaps a bit *too* casual even in her "private mode."



"Hey, we're back!"

"We have returned."

After saying our farewells to Tsubaki-sama, Efil and I had returned to the inn where we were staying. Gerard was still out, but Sera was already there.

"Oh, hey, welcome back. You two went to the castle again today?"

"Yeah. What about you, Sera?"

"I fished like a pro! As you taught me, I made sure to release the fish I didn't

need back into the water.”

“I...see...”

To fulfill the promise that I’d made the other day, I had found time here and there to teach Sera how to fish. In this, too, she exhibited her uncanny ability to master things in no time at all. Thanks to the wealth of detection skills she possessed, she could instantly determine where her prey was. With precise handling of the rod and strength disproportionate to her shapely arms, she developed a powerful style not bound by customs or common practices. All without even picking up the Fishing skill, by the way. At this point, she had made quite a name for herself in Toraj as “the mysterious, beautiful angler.”

“Today’s opponent put up quite a fight. It was about three meters long, I think!”

“Hahaha...that sounds like fun. I would have loved to see it.” *No, but for real, that’s on the scale of Pacific bluefin tuna, isn’t it? What the hell are you putting your poor commercially bought fishing rod through?*

“Don’t worry, I brought it back to serve as tonight’s main dish!”

“Uh...who’s gonna dress and fillet it?” *So, this falls under your “need” category, huh.*

“Efil, of course. I’ve already dropped it off at the kitchen.”

Leaving a fish that size in the kitchen is just causing trouble for the inn. And come on, even Efil wouldn’t be able to fillet a whole tu—

“Master, I’ve already taken a look at it. How would you like it? The locals seem to have several ways of preparing fish: *sashimi*, where they slice the meat into small pieces and eat it raw; *nitsuke*, where they simmer the meat in a condiment called ‘soy sauce,’ among other things; and *tataki*, where they sear the surface of the fish but leave the inside largely raw. I was actually just about to go dress and fillet it.”

“Ummm...yeah, I’ll leave that to your discretion.”

“Understood. I will do what I can.”

Since when has she mastered how to dress and fillet tuna? Did she learn that

from the head chef of Toraj Castle too?

“My king, what was that in the kitchen?! Is it a new kind of monster?!”

Oh, Gerard’s back. And it seems like he’s gotten a look at dinner.

“How rude. I fished it; it’s a proper fish! I even heard from the locals that it’s a high-class fish.”

“Is it really...?”

“She’s right, Gerard-san. It is a high-class fish called *naatu* that lives in the Dragon Sea. I can’t wait to try my hand at cooking it!”

“Don’t worry, man. It’s probably really delicious.” *I swear I’m not going to retort anymore. I’ll just say what I’ve got to say and move on.*

“Since everyone’s here, I might as well make my announcement: tentatively, we’ll be heading back to Parth in three days’ time. Make all the preparations you need to.”



Even after the Heroes of Deramis had departed for the Western Continent, my party remained in the city a while longer. During that time, Efil and I had gone in and out of the castle frequently, all at the invitation of the queen. Due to this, our faces had gained quite a bit of familiarity among those who lived or worked in the castle. However, not everything that came with this close relationship with the Toraji monarch was what we desired.

“By the way, Kelvin. Are you sure you don’t feel like serving Toraj? If you accept now, I can even appoint you to the Tsubaki Guard, the most desirable position of honor in this country. Such a wonderful opportunity might not come again!”

“As I have said many times, I like to be free to do my own thing. You sure don’t know when to give up, Tsubaki-sama.”

Once more, I was being solicited for my services by the young queen, this time in the tatami-lined room that was part of her own quarters. It was during a perfectly amicable chat over tea that she had brought up the topic yet again. The average person wouldn’t think of turning down a direct offer from the ruler

of one of the largest countries in the world, but adventurers tended to highly value the freedom of not being beholden to anyone. The higher the rank, the more prominent this trait was, and I was no exception. In other words, it wasn't a matter of the compensation; I simply wasn't going to accept, period.

"That is one of my endearing traits, is it not? I want what I want, and I'm honest about it! I don't compromise, and I don't lose heart!"

"Where on earth has all that noble dignity you showed to the Heroes gone?"

In spite of the repeated rejections, Tsubaki-sama had no intention of backing down. Again and again, she brought the matter up. Round and round we went, with neither side willing to yield an inch. It was an infinite loop between an adventurer who valued his own path and a queen obsessed with recruiting those with talent.

"Master, what would you like for lunch today?"

"I'd love some grilled fish."

For some reason, Tsubaki-sama had jumped in and answered the question instead. The queen had dropped all pretense of formality.

"If that is the case, I can use the fresh fish that Sera-san caught this morning."

"Mm, that will do."

"Uh...there's a lot I want to comment on, but forget it. Efil, I'll have the same."

"Understood. I promise that the fish will be the perfect shade of golden brown."

"With Efil here now, I can hardly wait for mealtime every day. The chefs in my employ have also improved across the board. Efil, well done! How would you like to become my personal chef?"

This was the fourth time that Efil was being solicited by the young monarch.

"The invitation is an incredible honor, but I am afraid I cannot accept. Both my body and heart belong fully to my Master. My will shall never change nor waver."

“Did you hear that, Kelvin? As a man, are there any words that could make you happier?”

“Um, uh...”

“Oho! Are you embarrassed? Tell me, are you embarrassed?”

“Please...don’t poke fun at me, Tsubaki-sama. I’m just happy is all.”

I tried to play it off, but there was still a slight blush on my cheeks in a rare display of embarrassment brought about by Efil’s declaration and Tsubaki’s teasing. Naturally, there was no way that my incredible maid, who held me above all else in the world, would not notice this change.

“Master, your body temperature seems a bit high. Are you not feeling well?”

“Don’t worry, I’m feeling...very well. My chest is just overflowing with happiness right now...”

I heaved an internal sigh of relief that Gerard was not present. If the knight had been here, he would have followed up with something snarky, which would have led to knight and queen hitting it off and causing an even bigger headache for this poor cornered Summoner. And if Tsubaki-sama had proceeded to solicit him — well, in short, it really was a blessing that Gerard had not come along today.

After parting with the Heroes, Gerard and I had once again confirmed our bond with each other. No matter what Tsubaki said, he would have turned her down as emphatically as Efil had. Well...maybe he would have. It was hard to tell, as the knight had a...playful side to him that would sometimes spur him to do the unthinkable.

“You two sure drive a hard bargain. All right, best offer yet: how would you like to become my personal caretaker!”

“Tsubaki-sama, that sounds like a downgrade from the guard position you mentioned before...”

“No, no, hear me out. Depending on how you look at it, this would be an upgrade. If you became my personal caretaker, you would be helping me change in the mornings and bathe in the evenings. I know I may be tooting my

own horn here, but I have a rather desirable appearance, do I not? If you are interested in taking matters in *that* direction...you would have a fighting chance!”

“Uh...”

Tsubaki threw out her chest proudly. She had finally resorted to putting herself onto the negotiation table. I furiously wracked my brain for a way out of this tricky spot.



“I see. So, in short, the duties of the position would be the same as what I do for Master.”

Tsubaki choked in response to the unexpected comment from Efil.

“Tsubaki-sama?!” both Efil and I cried in concern.

“D-Don’t worry, I’m fine. I was just a bit caught off guard is all. You don’t look like it, but Kelvin, you...you sure are a shameless man!”

Tsubaki-sama turned her face — which was now even redder than mine had been earlier — to the side. For being the monarch of one of the largest countries in the world, Queen Tsubaki Fujiwara was a surprisingly innocent girl.

“You were the one who brought the topic up, Tsubaki-sama. And Efil, please don’t mention that kind of thing in front of other people, all right?”

“Why not, Master? I did not say anything to be ashamed of.” There was no hesitation in her response at all.

“Even so, it reflects on my reputation. All right, then, let me put it this way: what we do when we are alone with each other is a secret just for the two of us. You can’t let anyone else know.”

“A secret only for the two of us! I understand fully, Master.”

Efil’s expression and tone were entirely normal, but her elven ears were a different story. The specifics will be abridged, but in short, those ears were as expressive as a dog’s tail. Apparently, the word “hesitation” just wasn’t in her book.

“So, this approach did not work, either. What formidable opponents you are...”

“Tsubaki-sama, may I ask something?” I inquired.

“You may.”

“Why are you so eager to recruit us? Toraj is a large country, and I have heard that it is even under the Water Dragon King’s protection.”

I had been wondering about this for a while now. Wanting to recruit rare talent was common for someone in a position of power, but Tsubaki’s

persistence had gone far beyond what would be considered normal.

“Good question!” she replied before slowly correcting her posture as if to ramp the tension. After a dramatic pause, she declared, “Because it’s my hobby!”

“Efil, I think it’s about time we get back home for the day.”

“No, hold on! I was joking, of course. Well, half of it was a joke!”

In other words, she had been half serious. However, Tsubaki-sama seemed to understand that any further kidding around would be counterproductive. She quickly mustered some measure of the dignity that she had adopted while facing the Heroes of Deramis.

“This ‘Water Dragon King’ that you speak of is known as the ‘Dragon God’ among us. And it is as you said; we truly do believe that we have his blessing. When we were under attack by a massive fleet during a great war in times past, a storm sprang up that swallowed the enemy whole. When we were attacked by a terrible monster — an unbelievably large slime according to the history texts, if you would believe them — we were pulled back from the brink of annihilation by the timely arrival of the Hero of the age.”

“I...see. Right, big slime...”

I forced a smile and averted my gaze, trying not to feel guilty. Of course, one of my Followers, Clotho, was the exact same species of slime as the monster that Tsubaki had just described. Naturally, I had no intention whatsoever of bringing that up, although in Tsubaki’s case, hearing about Clotho would likely spur her to redouble her solicitation efforts rather than recoil.

“However, we cannot rely on the Dragon God for protection forever. I wish to bolster Toraj’s natural strength during my reign. That is my true motivation.” Tsubaki looked out her window at the country spread out below us and smiled fondly. “Deramis has the Oracle and the Heroes. Gaun has the Beast King and his children. Trycen has a whole army, as well as many remarkable generals who lead that army. The last one in particular seems to be making rather suspicious movements as of late, with the Black Wind issue that you helped to resolve being one such example. The more prepared I am now, the better off I will be down the line. Do you now understand where I am coming from?”

“Well...yes, I suppose I do.”

“Ohhhh! In that case...!”

Tsubaki was so excited that she leaned forward over the table, but I raised a hand to curb her expectations.

“However, the two matters are completely separate. My will remains unchanged.”

“Even after I have been this open with you?! The cruelty!”

My cold response — delivered while grabbing one of the orange-like fruits called “*mikan*,” which were laid out on the table — prompted Tsubaki to flare up again. While stuffing my face, I thought to myself, *If I let her go on, we’ll just be repeating the same conversation all over again.* Well, that, and, *The other piece of fruit, the one that Efil squeezed a few times, was definitely sweeter and more delicious.* In any case, I desperately tried to change the topic at hand.

“Speaking of the Water Dragon King, he should be quite strong, right? After all, he’s an older dragon and dragons are supposedly one of the most powerful races in the world. I would love to meet him even once.”

Although I wasn’t lying, I had left out a rather important detail. I wanted to meet the dragon *because I wanted to see how it would be to fight him.*

“Are you interested in the Dragon God? We *can* go visit him in the Dragon Sea if you so wish.”

“Wait, really?”

While casually picking out the white pith on her *mikan*, Tsubaki had just dropped quite a bombshell.



Bordered by the Dragon Sea and blessed with fertile swaths of land, Toraj was a country with booming fishing and agriculture industries. By wisely leveraging local agricultural methods and unique shipbuilding techniques passed down through the generations, this Japan-like kingdom had secured for itself the position of foremost industrial nation in the world.

There was a system in place where anyone who made significant

contributions — those who helped to support or push the country forward in some tangible way — were rewarded proportionally. This was as true for those running large farms as it was for those heading fleets of fishing ships, which would then sell their harvests or catches wholesale to the local market.

There were any number of ways in any number of industries to distinguish oneself. Taking the fishermen as an example, someone whose skills were publicly acknowledged would have his exclusive fishing area expanded, in turn giving him more access to rarer prey.

However, there was a certain area within the Dragon Sea that no fishermen — regardless of what sort of name they had made for themselves — were allowed to venture. This was the Dragon Path of the Vermilion Shrines, a series of vermilion *torii* gates that were seemingly floating over the ocean. This path, which actually led to the den of the Water Dragon King, was strictly off limits without express permission from the queen.

At present, Efil and I were standing in that very forbidden spot, having been brought there by Tsubaki-sama herself.

“Whooo! Look at the *torii*!” I gasped. “This scenery is amazing! And we have it all to ourselves!”

“It does seem overwhelming somehow,” Efil agreed. “It’s beautiful.”

There wasn’t a single fishing vessel in sight all the way to the horizon. On land, too, there was only myself, Efil, and Tsubaki-sama, with no one else as far as the eye could see. The crowds at the beach that my party had visited with the Heroes seemed like a distant memory when looking at the sight before us now.

“Even the citizens of Toraj are only allowed to come here once a year to worship during our annual festival. That is how sacred this place is. You understand? I have brought you two here only because it’s *you*, all right? This is a very special exception!”

“Thank you so much, Tsubaki-sama,” Efil said with a bow.

“Your heart is as wide as the sky and as deep as the sea. I stand in awe before you, Tsubaki-sama!”

More than satisfied with the praise, the Queen of Toraj threw her chest out

and said, “I’m glad you’ve recognized that!”

However, this was where our problems began. Having arrived at the Dragon Path of the Vermilion Shrines was fine and all, but the all-important den was nowhere to be seen.

“Sooo...where exactly is the Water Dragon King?”

“The Dragon God? Right there!”

“Right...where?”

With a snap, Tsubaki-sama closed her folding fan and thrust it towards the interior of the *torii*. She was pointing at the depths of the Dragon Sea.

“Tsubaki-sama...”

“What is with those accusing eyes?! I have not lied to you! Normally, the sea would part along the *torii* in a breathtaking display, revealing a path straight to the Dragon God’s den. However, he is a bit of a whimsical being, and he opens the path only when he truly desires to do so. Even I have not had the honor of an audience for a long, long time. So...well, don’t take it personally!”

Tsubaki-sama chuckled loudly as she gave my back several heavy slaps. However, her attempt to gloss over the situation had clearly fallen flat. Just like a horse that had been baited with a carrot and then had it taken away, my shoulders drooped as disappointment radiated from every pore of my body. It was all too clear to anyone watching just how much I had been looking forward to the fi— I mean, the meeting.

Thanks to Efil wordlessly stroking my back, I eventually recovered enough to manage, “Well...guess I should be glad that I got to see this amazing scenery.”

“Oh, have you recovered? How starved for battle *are* you? I wish my soldiers had even half of your enthusiastic mindset.”

Tsubaki-sama’s words sounded like a joke, but chances were high that she was partly serious as well. *Wait, would that mean less fun for me? No, but if they all come at me at once...*

“Hey, if it isn’t Kelvin and Efil! Are you two here to fish as well?”

“What?”

A bright voice that I was all too familiar with prompted me to turn around. The beautiful woman standing in the distance, her Efil-tailored Chinese-style dress and fire-red side ponytail blowing about in the brisk sea wind, was none other than Sera. Apparently, she had been there all along, just out of sight in the shadow of a levee.

“Oh, hey, Sera. Why’re you here?”

“What do you mean ‘why’? Tsubaki told me that she knew a great fishing spot, so I followed her, and she led me here! Thanks to her, I’ve been able to catch a ton of really rare fish, and there’s no one else around, so I have the whole place to myself! Aren’t you two here for the same thing?”

Sera proudly shoved forward a container that was more like a bathtub than a bucket. Within it were a variety of freshly caught fish swimming around, almost like they were in an aquarium.

“Oho! They’re small but I spy *naatu* in there! Those are my favorites!”

“Is that right? We actually had *naatu* yesterday, so I was planning on letting them go. You want them instead?”

“Are you sure about that?!” The queen laughed merrily. “Kelvin, you sure have wonderful compa—”

I interrupted her by placing a hand on her shoulder. Tsubaki-sama seemed intent on wrapping everything up quite nicely, but sometimes, things just don’t work out that way.

“Tsubaki-sama, truthfully, why did you bring Sera here too?”

“Um, uh...I only told her about this place because this is a great fishing spot,” replied the queen. However, her eyes were shifting so furiously that they almost seemed to be swimming. *Ahaha as expected of the queen of the Country of Water...she can make her eyes “swim” without even getting wet!*

“Didn’t you say this is a deeply sacred place and therefore strictly off limits?”

“I...did indeed. I do not lie.”

“Oh, right, I remember now. Tsubaki asked me if I wanted to stay in Toraj as a general! I did turn her down on the spot, though!”

Sera's words proved to be an indictment for the queen. Judging from her bright tone and cheerful expression, Sera clearly had not made the comment with any malice. Even so, the queen's favor of offering this sacred ground as a fishing spot had been betrayed in the worst possible way.

"H-Hold on! That was meant to be a secret between the two of us —"

"Master, is that not Gerard-san over there?"

This time, Efil pointed in the opposite direction. Squinting my eyes, I could just make out a black armored figure lying on a beach chair far in the distance. Add a pair of sunglasses and it would have made the perfect summer vacation photo. Did he come here to get a tan? For his skin or for his armor? Even though his armor is already pitch black? Although it was true that he had become capable of materializing, what was the point if he was going to keep his armor on? There were a ton of questions that I wanted to ask the knight, but I pushed them aside. There were more pressing matters at the moment.

"Even you, Efil?" cried Tsubaki in the vein of "Et tu, Brute?" as she crumpled to the sandy ground. This was the moment where the queen learned Efil's priorities the hard way — with yours truly at the very top of the list.

"It was quite a good idea, Tsubaki-sama, trying to recruit my party members directly without going through me."

"K-Kelvin, hold on. Your eyes aren't laughing...your eyes aren't laughing...!"

Apparently, after a long round of negotiating, the price of a certain knight's betrayal had been a full set of tatami mats and interior decorations for a Japanese-style room.



With Tsubaki-sama's guards leading the way, Tsubaki-sama, my party, and I slowly made our way down a flight of stairs that wound beneath Toraj Castle. We were heading for the teleportation room. As it turns out, this very convenient device so often used in works of fiction existed in this world as well.

"It's my first time hearing about teleportation gates here," I murmured as our footsteps echoed through the stairwell.

“That is surprising. And here I thought all adventurers knew about them as a matter of course. You...sometimes seem oblivious to the most unusual things.”

“Ahaha, my own party members have often told me the same thing. I can’t help it; I did grow up in the middle of nowhere, after all.”

Behind us, I could hear Sera giggling to herself, but I pointedly ignored her. After all, I really *didn’t* know about any of this stuff. *If Rio knew that such a convenient method of travel existed, why didn’t he tell me earlier?!*

“Well, to be fair, this isn’t something that an average adventurer could use casually. We are almost there. There’s no helping it; I’ll have to give you a rundown on the way.”

Am I just imagining things or does she seem a bit happy about this?

“The teleportation gate is, as the name implies, a gate-like device that teleports whoever passes through it. The destination can be any other teleportation gate in the world, but there are certain restrictions. First of all, activating the door requires a massive amount of magic, with the specific amount being proportionate to the distance to be traveled. At the moment, you are going to Parth, so the amount of magic needed is on the lower side.”

“I see. And are there teleportation gates in every city?”

“No, these are generally only found in each country’s capital and a few of the other larger cities. After all, they operate on technology that has been lost over the ages, so, while we have no trouble using them, there is no one alive who knows how to build new ones. Accordingly, each country keeps its own gates under strict management. This is one of several reasons the average adventurer would not be able to use them for casual travel.”

Fair enough; there’s no telling what mischief people might get up to if these were open to the public. If the gates in the other capitals are also located beneath their respective palaces, it would be like a permanently open back door situated in the heart of the country.

“The only people who *can* use these gates are those with a certain amount of status. In terms that you, as an adventurer, would understand, it would normally have to be someone at Rank A, who has been authorized by the

gatekeepers on both sides. Do you remember when we asked for your guild card before? It was then that we applied Toraj's authorization to it. In other words, you now have the right to use our gate. And look at your card — it carries my personal seal! Not only does that allow you to use the teleportation device, but you can also claim additional benefits all over Toraj!"

I took a closer look at my guild card and, sure enough, there was Toraj's national emblem with the character “椿” (Tsubaki) in small font underneath, not written in the alphabet of this world but in kanji. My guild card served as my proof of identity and now it also bore Tsubaki-sama's express approval. *Based on the explanation that she just gave, though, that in and of itself probably isn't enough to use the gate.*

“Hang on a moment, please. Being acknowledged by you is an enormous honor, but I haven't received any authorization from a ‘gatekeeper’ on Parth's side. I would need that too, wouldn't I?”

In the first place, I had never heard mention of such a thing back in Parth. *I don't remember ever seeing a gate like this, either.*

“What are you saying? It's right there on your card: the required authorization from Guildmaster Rio, the gatekeeper of Parth.”

“I'm sorry, what?”

I took a closer look at my guild card. There wasn't anything that resembled an auth— oh.

“Are you referring to this symbol of a wing?”

“Indeed.”

“That's what it's for?!” *And here I was thinking the symbol to be the guild's mark all along. I mean, it was on the card when I first received it! Aren't they a bit too loose with how they're handing out these authorizations?!*

The queen laughed with delight. “I finally get to see your surprised face! Worry not, Guildmaster Rio is not a man who hands out his seal left and right.”

“What do you mean?”

“That symbol is the crest of the Adventurer's Guild in Parth. The Adventurer's

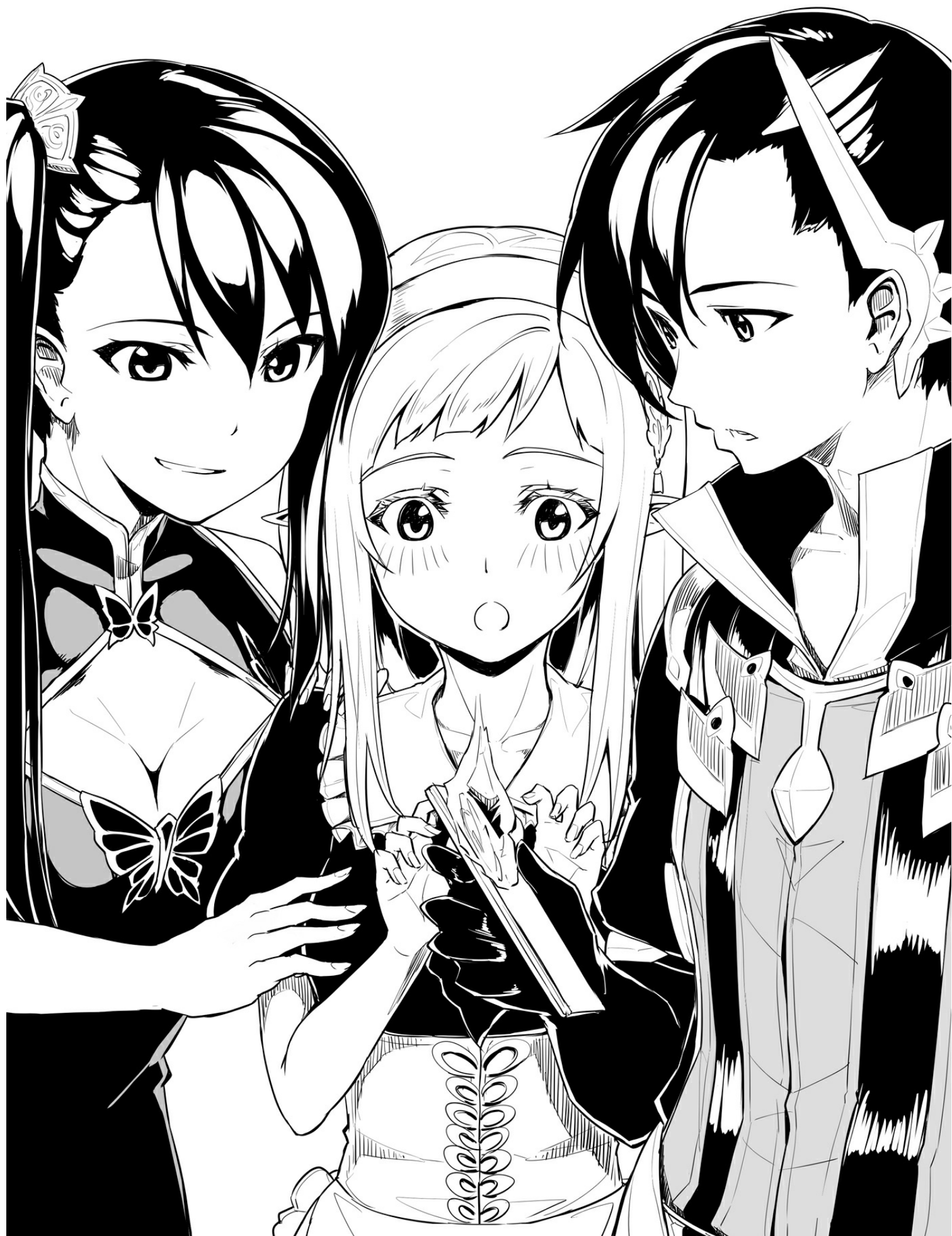
Guild here in Toraj uses a shield. The mark is printed on even Rank F adventurers' cards, but only when imbued with magic does it actually take effect. Go on, try pouring some magic into your card."

I obediently sent a small sliver of magic into it.

"Interesting..."

"So beautiful..."

Neither Gerard nor Efil could help but vocalize their feelings as they watched the golden light emanating from the wing symbol on my card.



“This is a phenomenon that only occurs with cards that carry Guildmaster Rio’s approval. That old geezer is an obstinate man, after all. He acknowledged you, but probably never bothered to actually explain it.”

“Nope, this is the first I’m hearing of it. In fact, he never even told me about the teleportation gate itself.”

“Hahaha! If I had to guess, he likely set it up when you turned your card in after your last promotion.”

As Tsubaki-sama laughed with merriment, a set of enormous doors came into view.

“We’ve arrived. This is the teleportation room.”

The doors opened, revealing a gigantic gate that seemed almost tall enough to touch the ceiling. *At this size, even one of my golems could walk through it.* Standing around the gate were seven people in mage-like attire.

“Everything is in order, Your Majesty. We have finished supplying the gate with magic. It is ready to be used at any time.”

An older man who looked like the head mage bowed at Tsubaki-sama, with the others quickly following suit. They were all breathing heavily, probably as a result of having used up all their magic.

“Well then, Kelvin. As you can see, the gate is primed and ready to go. All you have to do is select your destination and await confirmation from the other side. Do you see that stone pedestal over there? Place your guild card on it, then visualize where you want to go. Since you already possess the proper authorizations, the gate should open up automatically.”

What a fantasy-like way of operating the thing. All right, let’s give it a try. Guild card on stone pedestal. Visualize the landscape of Parth.

The device immediately roared to life.

“The gate has opened! Run on through! The portal only remains active for a limited period of time!”

“Wh-what the hell?!”

Please tell us important information like that in advance!

“Master, I shall go first just in case. Tsubaki-sama, I pray that we will meet again.”

“As do I. I look forward to the day I can taste your cooking once again.”

Without hesitation, Efil leaped into the twisting whirlpool of light. Tsubaki-sama clapped her hands to urge the rest of us forward.

“Go on, go on, in you go! The gate will be closing soon!”

“Oh my goddess, did it *have* to be such a hurried parting? Anyway, I guess we’ll be returning to Parth, then!”

“Feel free to call on me if you ever need anything in the future. I shall do my best to be of assistance. In fact, if you’ve changed your mind about serving Toraj, even now I —”

“See you later!”

It hurt my heart oh so much to cut off the queen mid-sentence, but the gate seemed like it was going to close soon, so I quickly darted over the threshold.



Light filled my vision for a split second, then my feet touched solid ground again. I heard the sound of two more pairs of feet landing behind me, then the gate closed with another roar.

“Judging from the fact that you’ve returned by way of the teleportation gate, I take it you’ve made quite the name for yourself over in Toraj, Kelvin-kun.”

“And hello to you too, Guildmaster. I wouldn’t really say that I’ve ‘made a name’ for myself; I just sort of did what I wanted to do.”

Efil, having jumped through the portal first, was standing in front of me next to Rio, who had apparently been lying in wait for us.

“You knew that we were coming back?”

“Mhm, the Queen of Toraj contacted me personally. She sounded like she was in an extremely good mood, so how can I *not* come to...*welcome* you back in person?”

“Hahaha, I guess you’ve gotta do what you’ve gotta do.”

“Hohoho, that I do, that I do.”

The air rang with our strangely nuanced laughter.

::Is it just me or is Kelvin acting kind of weird? What’s happening to him?::

::My king is quite bad at dealing with Guildmaster Rio. You can’t really blame him, as he’s been outmaneuvered several times now.::

Are you guys purposely using the Network’s open channel?! Not that Gerard’s wrong, but still!

“So, Kelvin-kun, how was your holiday in Toraj?”

“Very relaxing. I brought back a lot of souvenirs and even got to meet the queen in person.”

“And the Heroes of Deramis...I suppose that taking care of them was enjoyable too?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t believe how wet behind the ears they — wait...”

I thought I saw Rio’s monocle glint for a split second. No, I *know* that I saw it glint.

“Oh yes, I know all about that. You and your party were mistaken for Black Wind, and you had ‘no choice’ but to retaliate. And you managed to do so without dealing any significant damage to the Heroes. Well done, Kelvin-kun, well done.”

How does he already know everything in such detail?!

“But I wonder, was it really the Heroes’ misunderstanding? Or was this a setup by someone? And would that someone know how very much it had cost Parth to pull the wool over the eyes of the Deramisian spies? Did a certain someone consider the fact that if something had actually happened to the Heroes, it would have ended up becoming a diplomatic fiasco far beyond the scale of simply apprehending Christoph and his little group?”

Goddammit, I can’t win. How absurd is this old raccoon dog’s information-gathering ability?! Why am I finding myself having to apologize the very second

I get back?!

After somehow working through this awkward moment while my companions looked on in amusement, I found myself forced to accept a gigantic reward — *this is the bounty for taking down Black Wind, I guess?* — and was sent on home with a final, “Just be more careful going forward.”

So...I suppose I should take this whole thing as proof of Rio's trust in me?

Side Story 1: The Knights of Alcahl

The world was in an age of war, with countries everywhere constantly seeking faraway lands to invade, and receiving retribution in turn. In spite of the troubled times, however, a small country in the middle of the Eastern Continent was successfully maintaining its neutrality thanks to its wise king's peerless worldly wisdom. Without any enemies, Alcahl — for such was its name — was shockingly peaceful in comparison to its neighbors. The most violent altercations within its borders were between those who'd had a pint too much to drink, and such matters were quickly resolved. Today, too, a gentle and calm morning greeted the rolling green expanses of this nation.

"Hnnnggg...what a wonderful morning we're having again. The sun is so bright!"

A certain big-built old man stretched with a satisfied groan as he stepped out of his house. The well-worn suit of gray plate armor that he was wearing seemed at odds with the early hour, but the man himself did not seem bothered by it in the least as he made his way through a morning stretch routine. It was almost like the armor was a part of his body.

"My love, you're wearing that old thing again? You really do love your work outfit, don't you?"

From the same doorway emerged a woman who looked barely past thirty. Her mannerisms were refined and graceful, but there was a certain playfulness about her. Thanks to this, there were many who thought her far younger than her years. Even taking this into consideration, however, the age difference between her and the armored man was enough for them to be father and daughter. Yet she had referred to him as "my love."

"This is not my work outfit. It is my soul — my very way of life!"

"All right, all right. Looks like you're as passionate about your work as always, my lovely knight."

Indeed, this old man and younger woman were a married couple with a significant age gap. And they were not just any married couple, but one known throughout the neighborhood as a hopeless pair of lovebirds. They were extremely close to each other, and even had a child who had just passed ten years of age.

“Indeed, and off I go!”

“But you haven’t had your breakfast, my love! You aren’t old enough to go senile yet.”

“Gahaha, that was a good one!”

“I didn’t mean it as a joke, goodness. Come back in, the table’s been set.”

“This smell...it’s white rice!”

“It’s bread and you know it. I’m glad to see you in top form today, my love.”

It was still early morning, but the conversation between these lovebirds was already filled with jokes and laughter.



After finishing off his breakfast, the old man set out for his workplace in the very same attire. Of course, his jurisdiction covered all of Alcahl, so perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this was merely one part of his workplace. His feet eventually brought him to the training grounds of the kingdom’s order of knights.

“Good morning, Captain!”

A knight who had been practicing his swings stopped to greet the old man. He even went so far as to trot over first, and his voice was filled with respect. From this, it could be seen how high in esteem this older man was held. The title of his position was Knight Captain of the Alcahl Knight Order.

“Good morning to you as well. Glad to see you training hard.”

“Of course I am. After all, the safety of this country rests on our shoulders.”

Every single member of Alcahl’s revered knight order had unmatched — well, all right, their strength wasn’t exactly “unmatched,” but they all loved their

country dearly, and the amount of zeal with which they took to their training could be said to be without equal.

The country was at peace thanks to the king's masterful leadership, but the knight order knew better than to simply sit back and grow complacent. They patrolled the surrounding lands with great frequency and actively took responsibility whenever a dangerous monster appeared, very much living up to their roles as the country's protectors.

"By the way, Captain. That box in your hand..."

The older man was indeed holding something wrapped in a large cloth. Almost as if it were a baby, he was cradling it in his right hand with the utmost care. The wrapping was pink and embroidered with hearts. In other words, it was extremely eye-catching. Even the old man's subordinate couldn't help but notice and ask about it, even though he already knew the answer.

"Well asked! This is, of course, a perfectly normal lunch box."

"Ahh...so Betty-san made it, did she? You're making me jealous, Captain."

"Ahem. It's a lunch box made lovingly by my wonderful wife!"

"Why did you reword it?! Are you doing that to spite me?! Goddammit, why do you have a wife who's even younger than I am, while I'm still single?!"

The old man clearly wanted to brag to someone. "I'm just saying, even Connie helped with today's lunch box. Guess I have no choice but to carry this to my grave."

"You want to kill me with jealousy, is that it?!" cried the young man towards the undoubtedly besotted face that was hidden behind his superior's helmet. Then he sighed. "About that lunch, though, you should probably eat it, or else your daughter will get sad."

"What was that?! You think you know more about Connie than I do?!"

"Arg, you're so annoying...are you satisfied yet?"

"Mm! Very satisfied."

It was an exchange that took place nearly every morning within the Alcahl Knight Order. Over the ten years that this little routine had been going on, the

lighthearted conversation had done a lot to help break down the barriers between ranks within the order, bringing the members closer together. Whether the old man purposely kept it up for that reason was anyone's guess. However, there wasn't a single doubt in the minds of the knights that he would have been the same way had he been blessed with a grandchild.

"Oh, right, there's been a summons for you, Captain. It was from the king."

"The king, you say? Why didn't he just send the messenger straight to my home?"

"He probably didn't want to interrupt your morning time with your family."

"Ahh, you have a point. That sort of consideration is almost second nature to that king of ours. All right, I'll go pay him a visit now."

"Take care. And I'm saying this just in case, but...you can't brag about your lunch box to the king, all right?" the younger man laughed in jest. After all, no matter how much the Knight Captain loved his wife and daughter, surely he wasn't *that* lacking in common sense. The subordinate had cracked the joke with that assumption in mind.

"Why not? I do it every day."

"What?"

Apparently, there was a huge difference between what the two men thought of as common sense.



The old knight headed for Alcahl Castle, then made a beeline for the throne room. The country's seat of power was more like the residence of a feudal lord rather than the palace of a royal family. However, that was only in comparison to much larger kingdoms. Within Alcahl, nothing came close to the scale and quality of its ruler's abode.

"...and that is why the egg dishes made by my daughter, Connie, are the best in the world! One day, I'll share some with you, my king!"

"Didn't you already bring me some the other day? And I do concede that I loved every bite of it. Slightly burnt, but clearly made with the utmost care, and

tasting of a warm, loving family. You're raising a fine daughter."

This king was famous even among the neighboring countries as something of a sage. That byname reflected not only his own capabilities but also his generous heart, caring personality, and the deep love that he held for his country.

And yet, within his own residence, in front of his own throne, the man who held ultimate authority over the country was being forced to listen to a fervent speech by an old man holding a pink lunch box. And that was not all; this king had previously been compelled to eat the home cooking of the old knight's daughter as well. Someone witnessing this scene for the first time might be provoked into crying, "What the hell is a mere subject doing to his king?!" But this was actually a rather common occurrence in the castle.

Should the old man be admired for his nerve? Or should the king be praised for his magnanimous personality? Either way, in spite of appearances, the two were close friends, so there was no problem with the lack of formalities.

"Your Majesty, it's almost time..."

That said, if these two friends were left unchecked, they would continue their idle talk for hours on end. Although it pained him to do so, the minister who had been standing in attendance beside the king spoke up to bring the conversation back on track.

"Oh, is it already that time? Thank you. Well then, let's get to the real reason I summoned you today."

"Of course, of course. Apologies, my king. It appears I became too engrossed in our conversation. How embarrassing."

"Don't worry about it, old friend. There is no greater indication to me that our country is at peace. I very much welcome our talks."

Laughing merrily, the King of Alcahl turned to the minister at his side. The minister promptly spread open a map — which had been prepared ahead of time — to show the knight.

"This is a map of Alcahl, isn't it?"

Due to its small size, the kingdom had only one major city — which was where the royal palace was located — with the rest of the country being lush, green farmland with small villages scattered throughout.

“Yes, Knight Captain. If you would look here, please.”

The minister pointed to a spot in the south. A closer look revealed that several Xs had been drawn here and there.

“Sightings of a new monster have been reported from many people in this area. These markings indicate the locations of each sighting.”

“A monster...so we’re talking a subjugation expedition?”

“Yes, but...the opponent this time seems a bit troublesome...” The minister’s words trailed off, as if he were searching for a way to break bad news.

Seeing this, the king said simply, “According to eyewitness accounts, we supposedly have a demon on our hands.”

“A demon?!”

The old knight could hardly be faulted for his surprise. After all, demons were ranked up there with angels and dragons as the three races with the greatest strength in the world. The most recent Demon Lord in history, Gustav, had himself been born from the demon race, although — in spite of the title — not all “Demon Lords” were. The accounts of his final fight with Serge Flore, the Hero of the era, spoke at length of the terrifying powers that he had wielded.

“Thankfully, we’ve had no casualties so far,” said the king. “Our demon is a lesser one.”

“That is a relief. Even so, we cannot let our guard down.”

“Indeed. And that is why it would be dangerous to leave it alone.”

The fact that it was a lesser demon was no great consolation, for even lesser demons possessed strength and intelligence at least on par with Rank B monsters. Even veteran Rank C adventurers were helpless against such an opponent; it would take the best of the best to put up a fair fight.

The problem was, as most of the other monsters to appear in the center of the Eastern Continent were low level, the adventurers that stayed in the area

also tended to be of lower ranks. As such, monster subjugations largely fell to the knight order. A demon showing up was an extremely rare occurrence. But since it *had* appeared, it needed to be dealt with.

“I grant you full authority to form the squad you deem most suitable. Do everything you can to keep casualties to a minimum. Come back to me alive. That is an order.”

“Leave it to me. The demon shall be struck down without fail, and I will return to a parade of triumph.”

The old Knight Captain clapped a fist against his chest armor with a loud crash.

“Old friend, don’t expect too much in the way of a parade, all right? You know how tight our country’s finances are.”

“Please do not fret. Being welcomed back by my wife and child is enough of a celebration for me.”

“You *would* say that.”

Amid the warm laughter echoing through the throne room, the old man stood up and looked straight ahead, his expression fierce.

“Indeed I would! When I return home, my daughter is always at the door, waiting for me. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not bragging here. But when she starts telling me what she’s done during the day in that happy, excited voice, the pure joy that wells up inside of me...”

In an animated tone, the man continued to expound on what a blessing it was to be welcomed back by his wife and child.



Shortly after the captain’s audience with the king, thirty knights could be seen proceeding in a straight, orderly line across the rolling green countryside that characterized southern Alcahl. The armored figures, perched on top of similarly armored horses, kept a wary eye on their surroundings. The tension in the air was palpable, prompting nearby residents to maintain a healthy distance.

“Oh, it’s the knights! Heeeeeyyyy!”

“Look, mommy, the knights waved back at me!”

“Stop it! The esteemed knights are in the middle of a mission! I apologize for my son’s behavior!”

Well, not all of the residents stayed away. Children waved at the passing procession, in response to which the knights waved back. Parents chided their little ones, in response to which the knights gestured from atop their horses that they didn’t mind. Clearly, the friendly personality of the Knight Captain had rubbed off on the knight order as a whole.

“Children being energetic sure is great, isn’t it?”

“So true. Children are national treasures. Now, let me tell you about my daughter —”

“AH! We’re almost at the location of the first sighting!”

“O-Oh, I suppose we are.”

The change in topic was admittedly forced. However, when considering how far back the old man and his subordinates went, being made to listen to this topic several times each day sure added up quickly. Being a faithful husband and a devoted father were both great things in and of themselves, but neither were topics that people liked to hear about for prolonged periods of time.

Now that they were close to their destination, the old knight himself grew serious. “We can only hope that the target hasn’t moved elsewhere yet,” he murmured.

“I agree, I’m worried about the nearby villages as well. But then again, the area around here is flat enough to grant a good view of the landscape. Considering how big lesser demons are, we should be able to spot our target immediately. Not that I’ve seen one for myself before.”

At least one of the knights had been paying attention while attending his village’s place of learning when he had been young. The thing about demons was, the weaker they were, the more monstrous their appearance. And the more powerful they were, the more humanoid they looked. The demon that had shown up this time was the former. Almost all of the eyewitness accounts described it as “a big purple monster.” The only reason they even knew it was a

demon was thanks to an adventurer with Analyze Eye who had spied on it from afar.

Now, if their target had been an archdemon, it would have merited the dispatching of the most powerful knights in the kingdom and the hiring of Rank S adventurers to boot. If there had been any Heroes alive at the time, they would surely have been called upon as well.

“I haven’t seen one before, either. They don’t venture out from Abyssland all that often.”

“In any case, we’ve already evacuated the nearby residents. The fact that there hasn’t been a commotion yet means we’re still in the clear, right, Captain?”

“Let’s not be overly optimistic. Ow, my waist...”

“Oh, are you finally going to retire, Captain?”

Since they had set out, nothing particularly noteworthy had happened. Being on horseback was taking quite a toll on the old man’s body, and he found himself wanting to finish things up quickly so that he could head back home. The smiles of his wife and daughter came into his mind. The slightly burned egg dish. So delectable.

“What nonsense are you talking? As long as I live, I will be a knight. This is my calling.”

No matter the state of his body or how much he missed his family, he always took his duties seriously. That was the line the old man had drawn for himself.

“By the way, Captain, you seem to be in an especially good mood. Did something happen?”

“Good eye! I got to talk about all of the things I enjoy today, so I’m feeling quite content.”

“I’m sorry?”

Thanks to the sacrifice of the king and his minister, the old knight — his bad waist aside — was in top form.



“There it is.”

“So huge...”

The knights had dismounted and were now hiding amongst the shrubbery.

Deep within the woods that lay even farther south than the southernmost village was the target of their subjugation mission. The monster, which stood just under three meters in height, had bat-like wings, skin a poisonous shade of purple, and a face far too ugly to glean any emotions. It was an amalgamation of everything meant to incite fear in the human mind.

“Looks like it’s in the middle of a meal.”

“So gross...”

The demon was sitting on the ground, slurping blood from the carcass of what was likely another monster that had been living in the forest. The giant corpse, which looked like a cow with one horn, was lying on its side, devoid of life.

“Oh, good, it’s not a human.”

“It’s too early to feel relieved. This changes nothing; the next victim could very well be one of the villagers.”

The absence of the characteristic cheer in the old man’s voice reminded the others to mentally prepare themselves.

“Everyone, be on full alert. From this point on, we’ll be communicating by hand signals alone until we engage the creature.”

Whereas the common man would have been frozen with fear at the sight of a demon, the knights of Alcahl calmly sprang into action. Taking extreme care to not alert their quarry, the fighters spread out to their separate positions. Cleverly using the nearby trees for cover, they surrounded the entire clearing to prevent the demon from escaping. Once they were all in their respective places, the old man raised a hand slightly, then swung it forwards.

Swoosh!

“RUAH?!”

The knights positioned in front of the demon had fired their arrows. And

these were no ordinary arrows but steel ones, made specially to combat large monsters like this. Although they dealt no magical damage, the physical destruction they caused was quite impressive indeed. As hoped, the many shafts pierced the demon's thick skin, drawing streams of poisonous-looking green blood. However, the wounds were too shallow and none were fatal.

“Everyone, CHARGE!!”

“SIR, YES, SIR!”

Immediately, knights holding lances and kite shields leaped into view on either side of the demon. They kept their shields in front of them and used their lances to keep the enemy at bay, taking care not to get too close or back up too far. The creature whirled left and right in confusion and surprise. These knights knew their roles well and fully understood that this was not an opponent that could be defeated by charging in recklessly. Not by someone without equal power and strength, at least.

“RRRUUAAHHHH!”

“Hold on a — everyone, be careful! This thing can spit fire!”

The knights on the front line quickly ducked behind their shields. The roaring flames slowly melted the steel, disfiguring the Alcahl crests that were carved onto the shields' surfaces. It was all too easy to imagine what would happen if those flames reached one of the men.

“A breath attack?! What, does this thing think it's a dragon?!”

“Don't panic! At least its range isn't all that great!”

The demon's counterattack left the knights unsure of how to continue their assault.

“You lot on the other side, attack now!”

Hearing their captain's order, those stationed at the demon's back immediately leaped into action. The monster laughed scornfully as if to indicate that it had expected such a move. With a terrible cry, it began to spin like a top, spraying flames all around it. Even the cow-like creature that had been abandoned by its feet caught fire. The entire area was being transformed into

an oven, and the knights were left with no recourse but to hunker down behind their shields.

“You thought you had us, didn’t you!”

“RRRRUUUAAAHHHHH!!”

There was a soft *whoosh* and the demon screamed in pain. A steel arrow protruded from its right eye, and green blood was gushing out.

The man who had shot the arrow silently clenched his fist in a pose of triumph. “Yes! Bull’s eye!”

“Well done. As expected of a single man!”

“What?! Me being single has nothing to do with it! Ugh, anyway, I’m leaving the rest to you!”

“Mhm! Clear the way!”

The old knight rushed forward from the back, his beloved greatsword held at the ready. So furious was his charge that he seemed to be an entirely different person from the man who had been complaining about a sore waist earlier. The other knights stepped back to open a hole in their ranks.

“*Gugegege...*”

Incomprehensible chanting came from the demon’s mouth. Magic gathered around both of its hands, and was released all at once.

“A Black Magic smokescreen?! This bastard has some tricks up its sleeve!”

Having realized that it was outnumbered, the demon had chosen to make its escape. Its intention was to take advantage of the confusion and breakdown in communication resulting from the smokescreen and forcibly smash through the circle of knights. It was still far superior to the order in terms of individual strength. If it threw everything it had against a single knight or two, breaking through would be a simple task.

Or so the demon had thought. There was, however, a huge problem with its plan. To be more specific, there was a mistake in the assumptions underlying that plan. There was indeed one among the humans who possessed the power to stand on equal footing with the demon itself.

“Doesn’t...matter!”

The old man’s sword screamed as, with brute force, he swung it fast enough to whip up a gale of wind that blew the smoke away in an instant. The demon, who had been lying in wait, was immediately exposed.

“AGITO!”

A flying slash flew towards the beast. It did not even have time to scream.

Side Story 2: The End of a Dream

“Then one of the knights shouted, ‘You never stood a chance against this man, for he is the Knight Captain of the Alcahl Knight Order, the one and only Gerard Fragarach!’”

“OOHHHH!!”

“OOHHHH!!”

“OOHHHH!!”

Several months after the demon’s defeat, this small tavern in Alcahl had already seen several performances by minstrels telling the tale of the honorable knight’s battle against the wicked creature. With each recounting of the event, cheers and applause would shake the roofs and rafters.

“Stop with the ‘OOHHHH’ing! That story is already in the past!”

Within the crowd was one older man who had reached the end of his patience with the storytelling. That man was, as it happens, the very knight whom the stories featured: Knight Captain Gerard.

As payback for the endless stories they had previously suffered through, everyone from the king to Gerard’s own subordinates had taken to bringing up his exploits on a regular basis.

At first, the old man enjoyed them the way he enjoyed telling other tales of his past. However, these accounts quickly spread throughout the country, growing increasingly exaggerated with each passing day, until they reached a point where the old man thought he would die of mortification.

Lately, even his daughter, Connie, had started asking for it as a bedtime story. As a result, Gerard himself knew how to tell the tale better than most minstrels, but that was something he would never admit to. If he mentioned such a thing to the wrong person, he would never hear the end of it.

“Oh, don’t let it bother you, Captain. But still, whenever I think back to that

expedition, I still feel you would have done just fine on your own. Did we even need to be there? I mean, you literally bisected the beast with a single swing at the end there.”

“What are you saying? It was because all of you helped to weaken the demon that I had such an easy time of it. If it had just been me against it one-on-one, I certainly would not have gotten away unscathed. Are you guys listening? I didn’t defeat the demon, we did. So stop heaping all the credit onto me...I mean it.”

“Captain!” the knights cried.

The rest of the tavern wept with emotion as well. Even the innkeeper sniffed once, touched by the scene of his customers’ hearts coming together as one.

“That’s cheating, Captain. You can’t just whip out lines like that — the contrast with your usual demeanor makes it that much more effective!”

“What do you mean by my ‘usual demeanor?!’”

“Captain, you know what? I don’t think I even need a woman anymore. Please make me yours, Captain!”

“Hey, get off me and find yourself a wife already!”

It was just another day in peaceful Alcahl, with Gerard and his subordinates in their usual tavern, raising a ruckus and enjoying each other’s company. The cheerful commotion spilled out onto the road, causing passersby to stop briefly and listen in.

“The champion who defeated a lesser demon? Well, that was a waste of time...” one man in the crowd muttered to himself in a disinterested tone before walking off.

At first glance, one might have the impression of him being an extremely beautiful man. His pointed ears, however, betrayed the fact that he was no human but rather an elf. He disappeared quickly into the bustling crowd, already having forgotten the story of the champion who struck the demon down.

Naturally, there were both good and bad people in the world, with most

falling somewhere in between. But there were also those who fell beyond the boundaries of good and evil. Beings who were infinitely closer to the gods, that is.



The next day, the elf appeared before the king. Not a single one of the soldiers stationed throughout the castle had sensed him coming, and even Gerard, as the Knight Captain, hadn't the faintest idea when and by what route the infiltrator had reached them. Yet there the stranger stood. And what came out of his mouth was an unthinkable demand.

"What did you just say...?"

The throne room was filled with a silence so tense that it seemed almost suffocating. The elf stood tall before the King of Alcahl, clad in a splendid costume and radiating an imperious aura. His features were so fine that one could imagine him as nothing less than nobility or even royalty.

"You would make me repeat myself? I did not expect this from the King of Alcahl, the man touted as a sage. Well, no matter. I shall say it once more. Become a vassal of our great Rizean Empire and cooperate in the obliteration of the Holy Empire of Deramis."

"You scoundrel, are you making fun of us?!"

"Stand down, Gerard."

"But, my king!"

"Stand down."

Gerard, who was in attendance as the king's bodyguard, raised his voice in indignance against the elf's insolent behavior. However, the king stopped him with a raised hand.

"Apologies. However, it *is* a rather strange matter that you are raising, and not in a very diplomatic way. I know about your nation and the Holy Empire being locked together in the fires of war. I know also that the size of your country is much greater than our own, so much so that not even a comparison is needed. And lastly, I know that you are the chief of the Rizean Technological

Development Bureau, Jildora-dono.”

“Well, that’s a surprise. I believe I only introduced myself as a messenger from Rizea. To think that someone — a king, to be sure, but even so — from such a small nation on the Eastern Continent would know of me is impressive.”

“You have it backwards. It is because we are a small country that we are all the more sensitive towards the movements of the behemoths around us.”

“That is a fair point.”

For the first time during his audience, a small smile crept onto Jildora’s face. It was almost as if he had found the first person worth his time since crossing the border into Alcahl.

Chief of a “technological development bureau”? Is that on the same level as a general? Is he planning on using some sort of bizarre new contraption?

Clearly, the elf was in possession of an unknown power. Gerard remained on high alert.

“So, your answer, king?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but we cannot heed your request as it would force us to abandon the relationships and trust that we have built up with other countries over the years. Most of all, accepting this task would mean betraying my beloved citizens.”

“Even if declining means exposing your ‘beloved citizens’ to harm and possibly death? If you reject my offer, this country will not see tomorrow.”

It wasn’t clear whether he meant anything by the gesture, but Jildora slowly raised his hand towards the king. Despite having been ordered to stand down, Gerard couldn’t very well look on helplessly. He stepped between his king and the stranger, with his greatsword and shield at the ready.

“My answer remains unchanged,” replied the king. “You may take your leave.”

Even Gerard, the highest military authority in the country, could not help but break into a cold sweat at the dark aura being emitted by the elf. However, the king’s face held no shred of hesitation or fear.

“Is that so? It looks like you are a man with a spine, after all. That makes you much more interesting to me than this knight here, at least.”

“Well, I thank you for the compliment.”

Jildora’s form was beginning to grow dimmer. “Out of respect for you, sage king, I will take my leave for today. But do not forget, I am a person who means what I say. Tomorrow, the appropriate price will be extracted. If any of you wish to keep your lives, make sure that you run far, far away when night falls.”

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

“It’s a warning. A favor, as I am in a good mood today.”

Jildora’s figure faded away like a mist, his words left hanging in the air. Only the king and Gerard were left behind in the silent room. After a short while, the king said, “Knight Captain, raise our alert level to the highest level. Make all the necessary preparations in expectation of an enemy host approaching our borders. Additionally, open up the emergency escape route. If it comes to it, allow everyone to use it, regardless of status.”

“Yes, my king. Immediately!”

As he returned to his senses, the king began to issue more precise instructions. Every military and civil official of the country was summoned and, after a hurried conference, dispatched to carry out their respective duties.

However, this was a fatal mistake on Alcahl’s part. For the threat they were about to face was not an army from Rizea...



What is hell? Is the scene spread before me not the very definition of it?

The question looped over and over inside Gerard’s mind as he pushed his beloved horse to go as fast as it could. With the capital of Alcahl at his back and his daughter riding tandem, he was on his way to find a helping hand from beyond the country’s borders.

Why did things turn out this way? Why?!

After making all possible preparations, the country of Alcahl greeted the dawn fully ready to stave off an invasion. However, the Rizean host never came. They

found themselves faced with something far worse instead.

Pestilence.

This epidemic — dubbed the Plague of Death — swept through the country within a matter of days. The route of infection was a mystery. Anyone who began to show symptoms would waste away and die by day's end. No one knew of a cure, and the bodies were piling up at a terrifying speed.

What made it even worse was that the king had fallen first. With the country having lost its greatest mind and symbol of hope in one fell swoop, everything fell into absolute chaos. Everyone did whatever they could, Gerard included, even if they lacked the relevant training. Having heard rumors of a panacea herb, the Knight Captain immediately rushed to retrieve some. He exhausted every possibility during his search. But it was too late. The pestilence moved too quickly.

Three days after the nightmare began, Gerard had arrived home late at night to find Betty, his beloved wife, on the floor. Her face was shockingly pale, and a single glance was enough to determine that the illness was wreaking havoc on her body. Thankfully, she was still conscious. Gerard spent that day with his wife and would see no one else.

Betty, my king, my subordinates, my people...I have lost far too much. And — ugh — goddammit!

The pestilence had already dug its poisonous teeth into Gerard himself, as well as Connie, his beautiful daughter. The girl was now unconscious, and her life was a flickering candle. At this rate...

At this rate, even Connie will...

Gerard's mind was filled with nothing but dark thoughts. His spirit was worn down, and he himself was only holding on by the skin of his teeth. The only reason he could still move was the knowledge that his daughter's life was on the line. But the first to give out was not Gerard. His beloved horse had contracted the plague as well.

"Whoa!"

Just before collapsing, the stallion gave out one final cry so that its master

would know what was coming and leap out of the way in time. Thanks to this, Gerard was able to avoid injury.

“Your loyalty has been exemplary, old friend. Sleep now...”

Having lost his sole method of travel, there was no longer any hope of reaching another country in time. In other words, this was where — but even so, Gerard did not fault his horse. It had carried the two of them this far even in its terrible state, which was a feat worthy of a legend. Although burying the poor creature was beyond Gerard’s capabilities, they had been long-time companions who had fought together, and he stopped to pay it a moment of silence.

“What can I possibly do now? I have long exceeded my own limits. Any ideas, Connie?”

Thrum.

A sound that Gerard had never heard before sounded from around the bend before them. It was not the cry of a living creature or the sound of something magical, but something much more inorganic. He didn’t have to wonder long, however, as the source of the sound came into view.

“A golem?!”

Golems were automatons that normally appeared inside dungeons. They were hardly rare, but the one before Gerard’s eyes was clearly different. It was armored not with dirt or stone but metal. The steam engine that powered it was an anachronism, but there was no way for Gerard to understand that. All the knight knew was that this was a golem with a bizarre appearance. And most importantly, he knew instinctively that the creature was far more powerful than a lesser demon.

Clunk, clunk, clunk!

“You are a puppet under *that man*’s control, are you not?! Well, I have a sick person here. I’m going to need you to get out of the way.”



“.....-san.rd-san.”

“Mm. U-Uh...?”

“Gerard-san, you were tossing and turning. Are you all right?”

“Efil?”

Gerard slowly woke up, finding himself lying on his side in the shade of a tree. Apparently, he had been asleep for quite some time.

“A dream...”

“Umm, did you have a nightmare? Do you want some herbal tea?”

Efil retrieved a teapot and cup from Clotho’s Storage.

“Yes, I’ll have some, thank you.”

“Here you go. I had Clo-chan store it at the perfect temperature, so it should still be warm.”

Gerard took a sip with his helmet still on.

“So delectable.”

“I’m glad you like it. Is it helping you to feel calmer?”

“For the most part, yes. It...was a very nostalgic dream. One that I haven’t had for a long time.”

“A nostalgic dream? All of my dreams are of Master.”

“I see you’ve already learned how to naturally slip boasts about your love life into conversations! I’m not quite sure how I feel about that...”

If Connie had grown up, would she have become a sweet girl like Efil? The thought crossed Gerard’s mind for just a moment before he chased it away to a corner. Obsessing over the past might interfere with what he had to do now.

“I told my king that I would fully acknowledge him once he fulfills his end of the contract, but...could it be that I was the one lacking in determination?”

“Um, what are you talking about?”

“Hm? Ahh...I was just thinking that I wanted a grandchild soon. Give me POWER! Give me GRANDCHILD POWER!”

“Whhaaaattt?!”

While watching Efil devolve into a red-faced fluster, Gerard shored up his resolve to look towards the future.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing *Black Summoner 2: The False Champions*. I am Doufu Mayoi. With this being the second volume, I believe that there are many for whom this isn't our first meeting, but just in case, it is my pleasure to make your acquaintance. To those who have picked up this book from the beginning as a web novel or from the first volume, please accept my heartfelt gratitude for your continued support.

Well, well, well, here is Volume 2 finally published. This volume is the entirety of *Arc 2: Heroes* from the web novel. In the web novel version, the Heroes of Deramis, who appeared only briefly in Volume 1, finally get their time in the spotlight, though in a way that Kelvin and his party are deeply involved in. Whether this is a blessing or a curse for the Heroes...well, it's a bit of a toss-up, isn't it? All because the main protagonist is such a battle junkie...no, but the Heroes still got character growth out of the encounter, so this was a good thing for them. Yep, it was a good encounter, and that's that!

Aaaand I've already kind of run out of things to write about. What do other authors write in their afterwords? As a last resort, guess I'll give a bit more exposition on the characters that feature prominently in this volume.

With the Heroes of Deramis, we have a relatively common party comprising a justice-obsessed leader, Kanzaki Touya; the leader's childhood friend, who's always being dragged along on his shenanigans, Shiga Setsuna; the girl who's secretly in love with the leader, Mizuoka Nana; and the airhead who loves stirring things up, Kuromiya Miyabi. To be honest, I brought them in more as a foil for Kelvin, just because the protagonist of this series is so un-protagonist-like. I'll work hard to ensure that these guys don't lose to the other weirdos that are going to show up later. I'll work really hard.

When speaking of Deramis, we can't very well not mention the Oracle herself, Colette. I didn't actually plan for her to be such a Melfina fanatic, but my pen just went crazy by itself and wrote her as a total weirdo. If I can be open with

you, I actually liked her illustration the most out of all the other ones in this book. Uh, why has the word “weirdo” already come up so many times even though I haven’t really gone anywhere with this afterword yet? I’ve got to control myself...so, yeah, that “weirdo” was actually even better received than the Heroes in the web novel version, if you can believe it. Talk about a happy surprise. As the author, I also feel quite attached to this girl whose emotions go up and down juuuust a bit more abruptly than the average person. Even today, she is dedicating herself to Melfina, staunchly resisting Touya’s lucky lecher disposition.

Well then, next would be Sera, who graces the front cover of this very volume. She looks super cool, doesn’t she? The military uniform is great, and the gauntlets are great too. I cannot thank the illustrator Kurogin-sama enough! Thank you so very much. With her straightforward and unfettered personality, Sera brings cheer to her surroundings just by being there. Thanks to how whimsical she can get, I myself had a pretty easy time writing the parts where she shows up. Also, I like side tails. Yep, I’m a happy camper.

Umm, I still haven’t met my word count yet? Oh my god, Overlap-sama...this is pretty much the same word count as a short story, but takes me almost double the time to write. Um, so, yeah. Let’s do a preview of the next volume. Might as well.

There were about three months between the release of Volume 1 and Volume 2, so if all goes well, Volume 3 should be coming out sometime in December or January. In Volume 3, *she* is going to *that thing* and the cute you-know-who is going to go *poof*. The circumstances surrounding Kelvin and his friends will also be changing quite drastically. Well, I mean, they are still going to be doing pretty much whatever they want, but still. And there you have it, that’s going to be Volume 3! What, that doesn’t count as a preview? Isn’t it more fun when you don’t know what I’m talking about so then you wouldn’t get it? Though I suspect that was enough for those who read the web novel version to catch on. At least, I hope it was. But anyway, that’s going to be the next volume, and I’ll do my best to really polish it up.

With that, I hereby leave *Black Summoner* in everyone’s warm hands, praying that we might meet again next volume.

■ KELVIN

■ 23 Y/O / MALE / HUMAN /
SUMMONER
■ LEVEL: 86
■ TITLE: DEMON-KILLING CHAMPION
■ HP: 877/877
■ MP: 2,280/2,280 (+760)
SUMMONING CLOTHO: MAX MP - 100
SUMMONING GERARD: MAX MP - 300
SUMMONING SERA: MAX MP - 180
SUMMONING MELFINA: MAX MP - ?

■ STRENGTH: 174
■ ENDURANCE: 338 (+160)
■ AGILITY: 519
■ MAGIC: 1077 (+160)
■ LUCK: 691

■ EQUIPMENT

STAFF OF THE EVIL SAGE TREE (RANK A)
STRENGTHENED MITHRIL DAGGER (RANK B)
SKILL EATER (RANK S)
ASTARTE'S EMBRACE (RANK S)
TAILORED BLACK LEATHER BOOTS (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

SWORD MASTERY (RANK C) SCYTHE MASTERY (RANK A)
SUMMONING (RANK S) [AVAILABLE SLOTS: 6]
GREEN MAGIC (RANK S) WHITE MAGIC (RANK S)
ANALYZE EYE (RANK S) RESENCE SENSING (RANK B)
DANGER DETECTION (RANK B) CONCEALMENT (RANK S)
NERVES OF STEEL (RANK B) ARMY COMMAND (RANK B)
SMITHING (RANK S) SPIRIT (RANK B) IRON WALL (RANK B)
MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK B)
DOUBLE GROWTH RATE
DOUBLE SKILL POINTS
EXPERIENCE SHARING

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SKILL EATER (RIGHT)/
PARALLEL PROCESSING (UNIQUE SKILL)
SKILL EATER (LEFT)/
ACCESSORY CRAFTSMANSHIP (RANK B)
CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ EFIL

■ 16 Y/O / FEMALE / HALF-ELF / BATTLE MAID

■ LEVEL: 84

■ TITLE: PERFECT MAID

■ HP: 672/672

■ MP: 1,280/1,280

■ STRENGTH: 339

■ ENDURANCE: 335

■ AGILITY: 1,028 (+320)

■ MAGIC: 840 (+160)

■ LUCK: 169

■ EQUIPMENT

PENUMBRA (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID UNIFORM V (RANK S)

BATTLE MAID HEADDRESS IV (RANK A)

SLAVE COLLAR (RANK D)

TAILORED LEATHER BOOTS (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

ARCHERY (RANK S)

RED MAGIC (RANK A)

FARSIGHT (RANK B)

COVERT ACTION (RANK A)

SERVICE (RANK A)

COOKING (RANK S)

SEWING (RANK S)

ACUTE REFLEXES (RANK A)

MAGIC ENHANCEMENT (RANK B)

DOUBLE GROWTH RATE

DOUBLE SKILL POINTS

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE FLAME DRAGON KING

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■ CLOTHO

■ 0 Y/O / GENDERLESS / SLIME GLUTTONIA

■ LEVEL: 85

■ TITLE: DEVOURER

■ HP: 1,533/1,533 (+100)

■ MP: 917/917 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 720 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 964 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 711 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 643 (+100)

■ LUCK: 595 (+100)



■ EQUIPMENT

NONE

■ SKILLS

GLUTTONY (UNIQUE SKILL)

METALICIZE (RANK S)

ABSORPTION (RANK A)

DIVISION (RANK A)

DISMANTLE (RANK A)

STORAGE (RANK S)

BLUNT DAMAGE RESISTANCE

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)

■ GERARD

■ 138 Y/O / MALE / HADES KNIGHT CAPTAIN / DARK KNIGHT

■ LEVEL: 89

■ TITLE: PATRIOTIC GUARDIAN

■ HP: 3,240/3,240 (+1570) (+100)

■ MP: 438/438 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 1,108 (+320) (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 1,163 (+320) (+100)

■ AGILITY: 399 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 295 (+100)

■ LUCK: 317 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

DEMON SWORD DAINSLEIF (RANK S)

DREADNOUGHT (RANK A)

CRIMSON MANTLE (RANK B)

■ SKILLS

LOYALTY (UNIQUE SKILL)

SELF MODIFICATION (UNIQUE SKILL)

SWORD MASTERY (RANK S)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK B)

MIND'S EYE (RANK A)

ARMORED SKIN (RANK A)

ARMY COMMAND (RANK A)

TEACHING (RANK B)

FORTITUDE (RANK A)

HERCULEAN STRENGTH (RANK A)

IRON WALL (RANK A)

MATERIALIZATION

DARK DAMAGE RESISTANCE

SLICING DAMAGE RESISTANCE

PASSIVE EFFECTS

■ SELF MODIFICATION/DEMON SWORD DAINSLEIF

SELF MODIFICATION/DREADNOUGHT+

SELF MODIFICATION/CRIMSON MANTLE+

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



■SERA

■ 21 Y/O / FEMALE / ARCHDEMON / CURSED PUGILIST

■ LEVEL: 86

■ TITLE: MYSTERIOUS, BEAUTIFUL ANGLER

■ HP: 1,126/1,126 (+100)

■ MP:1,148/1,148 (+100)

■ STRENGTH: 640 (+100)

■ ENDURANCE: 551 (+100)

■ AGILITY: 638 (+100)

■ MAGIC: 627 (+100)

■ LUCK: 614 (+100)

■ EQUIPMENT

ARONDIGHT (RANK S)

QUEEN'S TERROR (RANK S)

CLIP OF CAMOUFLAGE (RANK A)

MITHRIL GREAVES (RANK C)

■ SKILLS

BLOOD DOMINION (UNIQUE SKILL)

COMBAT TECHNIQUE (RANK S)

BLACK MAGIC (RANK A)

FLIGHT (RANK C)

PRESENCE SENSING (RANK A)

DANGER DETECTION (RANK A)

MAGIC DETECTION (RANK A)

CONCEALMENT DETECTION (RANK A)

DANCING (RANK B)

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE (RANK B)

■ PASSIVE EFFECTS

BLESSING OF THE DEMON LORD

SUMMONING/MAGIC SUPPLY (RANK S)

CONCEALMENT (RANK S)



Bonus Short Stories

Clotho's Stroll

Boing, boing.

One of Kelvin's Followers, Clotho, was out on a carefree "walk" — insofar as slimes can walk — within a marshy area a short distance away from the city of Toraj. Because it could not show itself inside the city due to certain circumstances, Kelvin had, out of consideration, given it permission to wander around areas without much human presence. After contorting its body to express its joy in letters, Clotho had promptly headed off to a place "without much human presence." Namely, it had chosen this dangerous area where monsters roamed unchecked.

"Grrrr...!"

Of course, strolling through such an area meant encountering other monsters that were similarly wandering around. To avoid drawing unwanted attention even when seen, Clotho was currently adopting the appearance of a common blue slime. This area, however, was the habitat of Rank D and Rank C omnivorous monsters, where survival of the fittest reigned supreme. The small slime looked like nothing more than delicious prey to all that laid eyes on it.

"SHAAHH!"

A huge lizard opened its maw and lunged at Clotho, signaling the start of a life and death fight so common in nature. With a split second left before contact, Clotho faintly remembered something that Kelvin had told it.

"Feel free to do what you like with the monsters you meet. Have as many meals as you want to make up for everything you're missing out on inside the city."

Glomp!

The lizard that had jumped into the bottomless pool named Clotho lost its

consciousness instantly as its huge form was swallowed up and converted into nourishment. Its opponent, which happened to be the very incarnation of gluttony, reverted to its original size before suddenly recalling something else with a start.

“Oh, and if you find any monster parts that seem useful, can you keep them for me? But I understand if you can’t help yourself.”

Although it had no hands, the slime seemed to be clutching its head in a rare display of consternation. It wasn’t that it couldn’t help itself; it had simply forgotten. That said, moping about what was done wasn’t going to help anybody. The slime decided to simply apologize for its mistake and reflect on its Master’s words so as to properly carry them out next time.

“Shit! Where’d the goddamn lizard go?!”

“And we were so close to finishing this quest!”

All of a sudden, several adventurer-like people approached Clotho’s location while talking loudly. Judging from their conversation, they were searching for the lizard creature that Clotho had just wolfed down.

“Damn. Looks like it got away.”

“Pretty fast legs for such a big gu— hey!”

One of the adventurers and Clotho seemed to make eye contact.

“Guys, there’s a slime with a weird color over here. You think it’s a mutated species?”

“Slimes are all the same, aren’t they? If you want, just kill it quickly and turn it into XP.”

“Speaking of slimes, you guys want to hear something? Did you know there used to be a slime that got as powerful as a Demon Lord...”

“That’s just a legend. C’mon, dude, we don’t have all day.”

“Well, somebody’s in a bad mood. Sorry, little guy. Become my XP!”

With that, one of the adventurers swung his sword at Clotho. The slime thought the attack yawn-inducingly slow, but it still decided to muster all of its

mental capacity. What for? To comb through its memories, of course!

“What to do when you encounter humans? Uh...just leave them alone and run away, I guess. Though if that’s not an option, you can teach them a bit of a lesson...”

Mere iron was no match for one of Clotho’s tentacles, sharpened and hardened with the Metallicize skill as they were. Its appendages cut through the adventurer’s sword like a knife through butter, with the shockwave from the impact sending the human himself flying. And, just his luck, he ended up hitting his head upon landing and was out like a light.

“T-Tonio?! Did I just see Tonio fly through the air?!”

“What the hell? What just happened?!”

The ensuing development hardly requires any detailed telling considering how one-sided it was. When the dust settled, all that was left were badly beaten up adventurers lying unconscious on the ground. However, this was where a problem arose. When Clotho carefully thought things over again, it recalled that there had been a little bit more to that last sentence from Kelvin.

“...if they are bad guys.”

Clotho thought long and hard. What constitutes a “bad guy”?

Their eyes met. They drew their swords and attacked. That’s what bad people do!

There was no longer any doubt that these were indeed the very trash of human society. Satisfied with itself, Clotho generated a few clones to secretly carry these unconscious villains to the front door of the Adventurer’s Guild so that they could be arrested.

One good deed for one mistake. It was a pretty good stroll, all in all!

Swimsuit Shopping

Everything had started with an abrupt request from Sera. This was a short while after she had jumped into the middle of an altercation between the Heroes of Deramis and some local hoodlums and delivered her own brand of

justice upon the latter. Afterwards, we had resumed our shopping trip, with Gerard having rejoined the group and the Heroes coming along.

“Kelvin, I want a swimsuit!”

“What?” *Talk about being sudden. Where’s this coming from?*

“What...is a swimsuit? Do you know, Gerard-san?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea either. Sera, lass, what is a swimsuit?”

To my surprise, neither Efil nor Gerard had ever heard of swimsuits before. Although when I thought about it, it made sense. What I should have been more surprised by was hearing the word come from Sera’s mouth.

“I don’t know either! When I was fishing, I heard a girl shouting loudly that her store was selling them. ‘These can only be found in Toraj! How about buying one as a souvenir; this is the best thing for playing in the water!’, supposedly.”

“So you don’t actually know what it is either!”

Then again, I knew about Toraj having swimsuits only because Tsubaki-sama had briefly brought it up during one of our conversations.

“Kelvin-san, you know what swimsuits are?” asked Touya. “This is my first time hearing that this world has them too.”

“As expected of Master.”

Efil directed eyes brimming with admiration towards me. I felt a bit embarrassed, though, as possessing such knowledge didn’t really make me worthy of much respect. Then there were the Heroes, who were surprised by the fact that this world actually had swimsuits.

“Well...since the sea is so close, might as well, I guess. All right, let’s go buy swimsuits.”

“Wait, really?!”

The moment I voiced my consent, Sera leaned over with eyes practically blazing. *She’s that happy about it?*

“Then can I also pick up that evil-warding sta—”

“I said ‘no’ for that one already!”

And so, the eight of us made our way to a swimsuit store near the seaside. With its stylish-looking design and the signboard outside depicting a cute mermaid, it wasn’t all that hard to find. A quick glance revealed that the inside had ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ sections partitioned off.

“Swimsuit shopping, a ritual of terror...”

“Miyabi-chan, what’s wrong all of a sudden?!”

“Bleagh...”

Fresh blood flew through the air. Not in a figurative way. It actually drew a beautiful arc.

“Kelvin, big trouble! Miyabi’s vomited blood!”

“Uhhh...Sera and Nana, you two should probably leave Miyabi alone for now. You’d probably only deal more mental damage to her at the moment,” I advised.

The two that I had named seemed to not quite understand what I was getting at, but Setsuna, who was clearly used to being the mother of the group, stepped in.

“Miyabi, you...I’m still within your tolerance level, right? I’ll lend you a shoulder.”

Miyabi, hang in there! Live strong!

With that, Touya and I headed off to buy our own gear. Of course, to be honest, nobody cares about guys’ swimsuits. So I figured we would just grab the first items we saw and be done with it.

“Don’t you think this suits you, Kelvin-san? Oh, wait, this might be good too.”

Wait, Touya’s actually doing this seriously? Dude, there’s no demand for guys choosing each others’ swimsuits, all right? That said, it’s too dangerous to let this lucky lecher meet up with Efil and Sera by himself. The safest option is for me to stay with him. Though maybe I could leave him under Gerard’s supervision as well?

“I’m terribly sorry, sir, but our store can’t really allow customers to try on swimsuits over their armor...”

“How can that be?! I have no intention of taking off my armor!”

I don’t know that person. He’s a total stranger. Goddammit, why do I have to deal with these two weirdos even though the girls sound like they’re having so much fun?!

“U-Um, is this not...pretty much underwear?”

“Huh? When Efil-san puts it that way, I can’t help thinking about it the same way...”

“Nana, swimsuits are for showing your true self. Nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Miyabi-chan, why do you have an enlightened look on your face?”

“Oh, I think I like this one! Looks easy to move in! You want one of these too, Setsuna?”

“A b-bikini? I think it would suit you wonderfully, Sera-san, but for myself...”

“Very well, one for me.”

“Miyabi?!”

“Miyabi-chan?!”

They...are having fun, right? Somehow, I feel like that might not be quite the right word for what’s going on. Given the way things are going, the beach damn well better be worth it. I just need to get through this part, then have all my fun when we’re actually at the sea!

“What about suntan lotion? Give me a large bottle, one that I can put onto every inch of my armor.”

“I-I believe you might be better served going to an armor store...”

It was only after quite a bit more chaos that we finally made our way to the shore.

The Mysterious, Beautiful Angler

“Perfect weather for a day out!”

Blue sky, white clouds, and the Dragon Sea spreading all the way out to the horizon. Wearing her favorite casual outfit and shouldering a fishing rod, Sera visited Toraj Harbour. She had decided that today, her first day off while here in Toraj, was going to be dedicated to fishing. The light outfit was indeed easier to move around in, but her getup was one that would invite ridicule from any local fisherman. It was not an outfit that one would normally associate with fishing, but Sera herself was serious about the task at hand.

Before coming here, she had first gone to purchase her rod. Thankfully, this was a city well known for its fishing industry. As such, there was no shortage of shops selling rods and other relevant gear. After browsing through three or four stores while cheerfully humming to herself, Sera chose a particular rod based on intuition, and paid for it using the pocket money — an amount equal to the reward for a high-ranked quest — that Kelvin had given her.

“Um, miss, this is actually a rod with a rather unique build. It’s not exactly the first one that I would recommend to a lady —”

The rod that Sera had selected turned out to be one that was designed for masters to fish big targets with. It was heavy like lead, and so stiff that it wouldn’t bend in response to anything small being caught on the hook. In fact, this was more of a monster rod that had been heavily modified to meet certain niche hobbyists’ demand for “something to catch monster fish with.” Naturally, this made it a tool that even the large majority of men wouldn’t choose to use, much less a young, slender woman. Because of her outfit, the store clerk had taken Sera for a tourist with no fishing experience and assumed she was merely looking to try it out. His advice had been offered with the best of intentions.

“Sorry, what was that?”

The next thing the clerk knew, however, payment for the rod was lying on the counter, and the woman herself had already skipped halfway to the door with the heavy item in one hand.

“Uh...it was nothing. Thank you for your patronage!”

The clerk decided not to offer further advice.

About thirty minutes after she started fishing, Sera had already seized the attention of everyone nearby. Her peerless beauty was definitely a drawing factor, but what was even more attention-grabbing was the mountain of catches that she was building up. So many energetically flopping fish piled around her made for a very conspicuous sight, to put it mildly.

“Next is...over there!”

“OHHHH!”

When Sera cast her line into the sea, a sharp *whoosh* roared through the air. This was a phenomenon made possible only due to the speed at which she was wielding her monster rod.

“Hup! Oh, it’s a small one.”

“Wh-Whaaaat...”

Mere seconds later, the red-haired beauty pulled up a fish that any other angler would consider a relatively large catch. Then again, there were several fish longer than a meter in the mountain of sea creatures next to her, so it was rather hard to refute her decision that this catch was a “small” one.

Now, why was Sera — a complete beginner at this — landing such prizes left and right as if she was loved by the gods? Sure, it could just be said that she had a talent for it, but her unnaturally sharp intuition and ability to quickly respond to changes were also significant contributors.

Thanks to the large variety of detection skills that she had mastery over, Sera could accurately tell where her prey was and then cast her line accordingly. There was a secret with the bait that she was using too: she was employing Black Magic to make it move about as if it were actually still alive. The final clincher was this epic rod that would not lose to any opponent and Sera’s own unbelievable strength. Every single onlooker was completely mystified by how she was drawing so much power from those slender arms of hers.

“She must be a once in a dec— no, a once in a century prodigy!”

“You! Go run and inform the Fisherman’s Guild! We can’t let such outstanding talent get away!”

In this way, Sera earned the name of the “mysterious, beautiful angler” among the fishermen of Toraj. Incidentally, the Adventurer’s Guild had immediately moved to block the solicitation from the Fisherman’s Guild, and so the matter never actually reached Sera’s ears.

Tsubaki’s Investigations

Two days had passed since Kelvin and his party began their stay in Toraj. During that time, the monarch of the country, Queen Tsubaki Fujiwara, had been swamped with work. On top of her usual duties, there was the fallout from the Black Wind Incident, the subsequent diplomatic correspondences with the other major powers on the continent, and, well, a few other things.

Perched on her throne, she opened and closed her folding fan repeatedly, clearly deep in thought. She looked so occupied and focused that anyone watching would have been discouraged from engaging her in conversation for fear of interrupting whatever weighty matter it was that she was working through.

Snap!

With a loud sound, Tsubaki closed her folding fan once more, then slowly opened her eyes. In the same motion, she proceeded to put the fan away inside her robes, then clapped twice. As she had ordered all the servants out earlier, the room appeared to be empty. And yet, a man silently came down from behind a ceiling panel and bowed deeply towards the queen. With his black mask and black costume, he looked very much like what Kelvin might have recognized as a “ninja.”

“Here at your service.”

“Kagenui, how goes the investigation? Has there been any progress?”

With his characteristic blank face, the man named Kagenui removed a scroll from beneath his shirt and proffered it to Tsubaki.

“Here is the report.”

“Mm, fast as always. Good work.”

Suddenly in a good mood, the young queen accepted the scroll, undid the string, and unrolled it. What was written inside might have looked like illegible scribbles to some and a unique form of broken-down and disfigured kanji to others, but the queen seemed to have no trouble deciphering the text as her eyes darted over the page.

“Oho, so that’s how it is! As I thought, this Kelvin is no ordinary man. He’s defeated an archdemon and reached Rank A as an adventurer in...isn’t the time listed here a bit too short?”

“It is indeed remarkably short. His real strength, however, is speculated to have already reached Rank S.”

“I see...I see, I see...”

“Tsubaki-sama, you’re drooling.”

“Oh dear, so I am. What a wicked man this Kelvin is to beguile me so.”

Kagenui thought the comment a rather unfair and baseless accusation, but he kept it to himself.

“Who’s this ‘Efil’ mentioned here?”

“She is an elven slave who serves Kelvin-dono as a maid. She is commonly seen wearing a maid outfit of a foreign design.”

“Ah, the blond one. She...what’s this? ‘Possesses cooking skills so incredible that all who eat her food are brought to tears’? Is this true?!”

“It is true.”

Possibly due to the blood of the gourmet-loving Japanese flowing in her veins, Tsubaki’s reaction to this entry in the report was quite exaggerated indeed. Before she knew it, she was on her feet, fists clenched, her Tsubaki Sensor fully activated. And she was drooling yet again.

“I want her...I really, really want her!”

“Then I believe you will be glad to receive this as well. It is a request from Kelvin-dono himself.”

“What’s this? Let me see...he’s requesting permission for his companion to

learn from the chefs in our castle?!”

“That is the case, yes.”

“Granted! Tell the head chef to do the teaching himself! Hurry! That way, I can solicit them in person!”

“As you command. About the next person —”

“What? There are more individuals worthy of attention?”

Tsubaki’s eyes returned to the report.

“It is Sera, the red-haired woman.”

“Mm, I remember her. Both women that accompanied Kelvin for the audience were of great beauty. So then, noteworthy points...fishing? Why is ‘fishing’ on this list?”

“She is no mere angler. From what I gather, on her very first day fishing, she pulled the same sort of catch that a fishing boat could. She even caught a *naatu* of significant size.”

“A big *naatu*?!”

“In addition, this Sera’s skill as an angler is improving. The local fishermen are saying that she just might go down in history by landing a legendary fish more delicious than any other in existence.”

“She’s hired! Hired on the spot! Don’t let her get away!”

“As you command. About the next per—”

“There’s more?! Y-You know what, let’s take a small break. I’m not sure I can take all this in one sitting.”

Tsubaki took a sip of green tea to wet her throat. The work that she had scheduled for the rest of the day had already completely left her mind, with almost all of her mental focus now directed towards planning how to solicit each and every one of these talented individuals. However, this was not a problem, as she still managed to get through her usual tasks at double the speed. All of the extra free time was then devoted to her solicitation efforts.

Top Maid in the Kitchen

What had started it all was the request made by Kelvin on Efil's behalf. Namely, she wanted to add Torajian cuisine to her repertoire. Considering how similar the local cuisine was to the Japanese cuisine that he knew and loved, Kelvin practically threw his hands up in a display of delight. And if he was to find her a place to learn it, then where better than the kitchen of the royal castle itself? So he promptly sent the request, which was approved in almost no time.

"Efil, Tsubaki-sama's given her approval. Go absorb everything you can."

"Thank you very much for your help, Master! I promise to pay it back in full!"

Deeply grateful to her master for having arranged such an excellent learning environment, Efil fired herself up even more in hopes of repaying this favor to him someday. And soon enough, this paragon of a maid found herself standing within the kitchen of Toraj Castle.

"My name is Efil. It is an incredible honor to be here. Please take care of me today onwards."

Efil lowered her head gracefully. Surrounding her were the highest-caliber chefs in Toraj, all looking at her with sharp, measuring gazes. And well they should, for every single person there had been acknowledged by Tsubaki herself. All of them took great pride in their status as royal chefs and spent each day in a fierce but friendly rivalry with each other, constantly aiming to overcome their own limitations in skill and creativity.

Naturally, the intrusion of an outsider in such a place drew stern looks. Indeed, Efil was currently being tested by them!

S-She's so cute...

You kidding me?! She's an elf and she's a maid?! She's an elven maid!!

An angel has finally descended into this sausagefest of a workplace!

Or not. Belying their sharp stares, the chefs were all inwardly dancing jigs of joy.

"Hmph! I can only imagine what must have come over Tsubaki-sama to allow a brat into our kitchen."

“H-Head Chef, you can’t say that!”

There was, however, one person who was not swayed by Efil’s presence. It was the head chef, the man who held the highest authority in the kitchen. Known as the most stubborn man in all of Toraj, he would acknowledge only those who could impress him with their cooking, trusting only in his own taste buds.

“No matter. Girl, make something, anything. Then I’ll decide whether you’re truly worthy of being here.”

“As you wish. Please give me some time.”

With a practiced hand, Efil started cooking. As expected of the kitchen of a royal castle, it was fully equipped with every manner of ingredient and industry tool. The chefs focused on what Efil was making...

Head Chef, if Efil-chan leaves because of you, I’ll hold a grudge against you for the rest of my life!

...All while nursing a certain seed of hostility towards their superior. Oblivious to all of this, Efil proceeded with her task, finishing up before long.

“Thank you for waiting. I am done.”

“You...this is...”

“Yes, it is a rolled omelette.”

The smile on Efil’s face was enough to steal almost any man’s heart. As for her dish...without the garnish, it was nothing more than a simple rolled omelette.

Interesting choice. The rolled omelette is basic, yes, but it is precisely because of its simplicity that there is much to it. The fact that she chose to make this means that she’s either just that confident in her skills or that she’s a complete novice. Tsubaki-sama, depending on how this turns out, you just might be seeing me walk out the door.

The head chef used a pair of chopsticks to cut off a slice and brought it to his mouth. He chewed slowly, taking the time to savor the entire piece. There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

“Head Chef, how is it?”

The tension rose as they anxiously awaited a reply.

“Head Chef?”

Every single person was holding their breath in anticipation of the old man’s verdict. However, there was no ruling no matter how long they waited. As some of the men began to worry that the dish had been bad enough to sour their head chef’s mood, the older man suddenly clapped a hand over his eyes and tears began spilling down his face.

“So this...is what heaven tastes like. This omelette melts on the tongue like a cloud, and yet every time I chew, a concentrated burst of flavor spreads throughout my entire mouth. The innate richness of the ingredients are brought out to the full — no, have been raised to even greater heights —”

On and on he went. With a wide variety of words and expressions, he heaped endless praise on the dish.

“H-He’s started! Head Chef has started his famous ‘monologuing’! And he’s still going on!!”

“That’s not all! Look at that waterfall of tears! He’s even entered his ‘crying’ state! Just how delicious *is* this rolled omelette?!”

The surrounding chefs, who had been reduced to a mere gallery at this point, loudly and excitedly discussed the glowing review of Efil’s cooking, growing increasingly worked up with every passing moment. Efil quietly slipped out of the uproarious kitchen, then turned to look up at the sky.

Master, I’ll do my best!

The very next day, Efil’s position in the hierarchy of the kitchen had already been flipped, with her offering the other chefs instruction. Even so, she continued to work hard, pouring herself into both learning and teaching.

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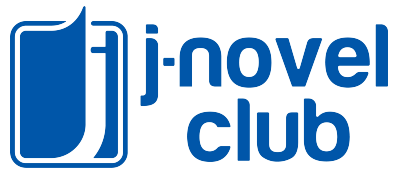
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Black Summoner: Volume 2

by Doufu Mayoi

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